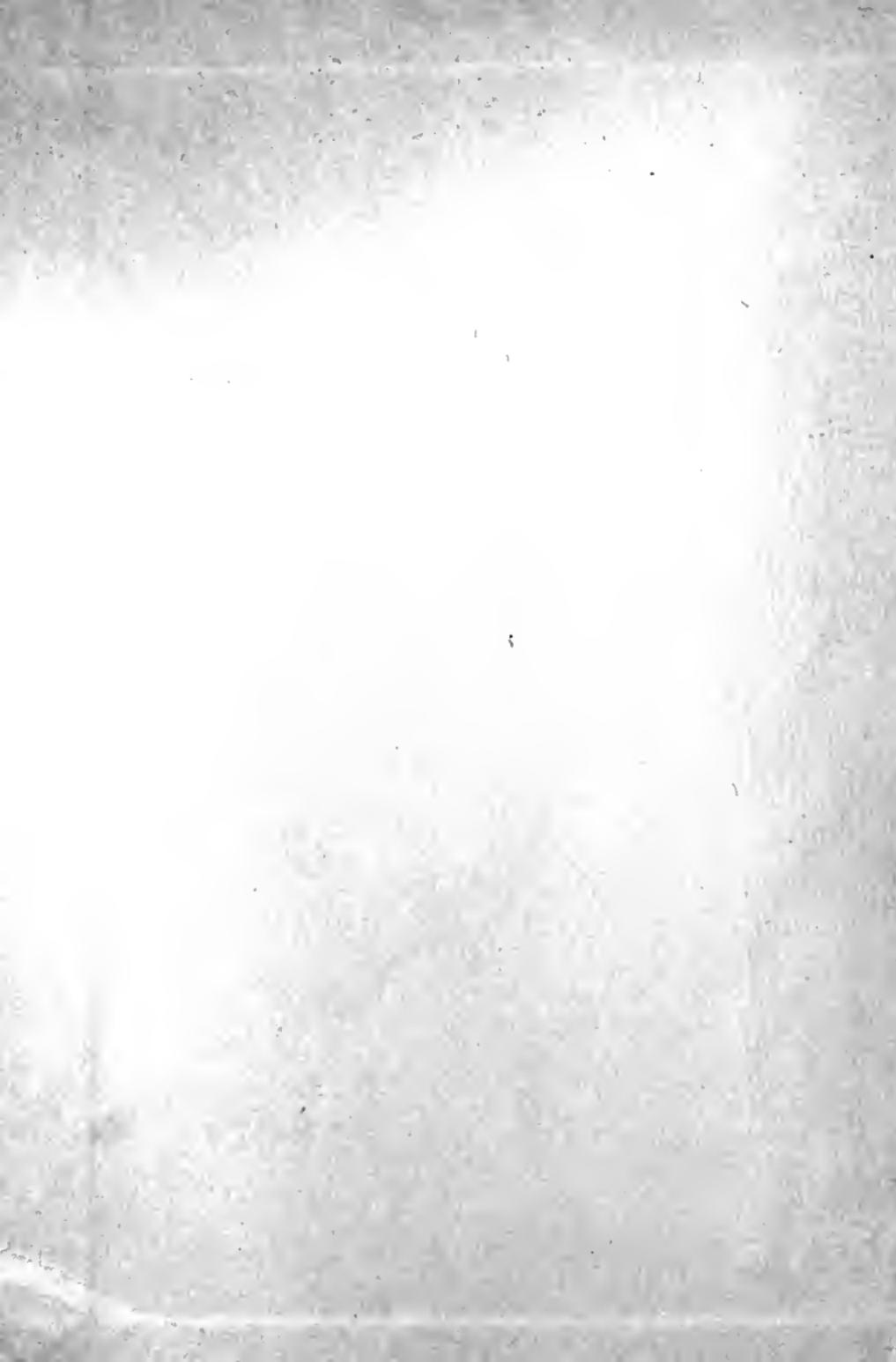


A Daughter of the Sands

Frances Everard



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A DAUGHTER OF THE SANDS

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A Daughter of the Sands

A NOVEL :: :: :: *By*
FRANCES EVERARD



NEW YORK: DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
:: *1922* ::

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PRINTED IN U. S. A.

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A DAUGHTER OF THE SANDS

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CHAPTER I

SAADA

JEANS, the Railsfords' odd man, and last of a once considerable retinue of servants, was just bringing the trap into the drive, when Lance Railsford called him.

"I don't think Miss Medene will drive to the station, after all," he said, glancing at the open letter in his hand. "We shall probably walk by the fields as far as Whitcombe, so if you take the luggage and pick us up at Hogglecote . . . Wait a moment, though—we'd better hear what Miss Medene has to say."

"As you wish, sir." Jeans led the mare towards the house. "But the young lady will miss the early London train, for sure, and——"

The girl herself was waiting by the stone balustrading which edged the tiny terrace, for Redlands, the Railsfords' pretty home, was quite an estate in miniature, with its shrubbed paths, well-kept lawns, and tastefully-laid-out flower-beds. Above the

ceaseless murmur of the trees on the hill she had heard neither Jeans' nor Lance's approach; her dark eyes were turned wistfully on the mist-wreathed valley backed by the jagged line of the distant Welsh mountains, and her thoughts were far away.

She turned, however, as Lance hailed her, and stooped to lift the small dressing-case at her feet.

"Is Jeans ready? I was getting a little anxious about the time," glancing at the watch on her wrist. "The train leaves Gloucester at 8.10, and it won't do to be late."

Railsford smilingly relieved her of the luggage. "Oh, bother the office, and what the others may say!" he returned good-naturedly. "You're going by the ten o'clock. Jeans will pick us up at Hugglecote. The post is in—early for once—and this letter—well, it just alters everything. You haven't seen mother?"

Saada Medene shook a wealth of raven-black hair. "She isn't down yet. It is still very early—only half-past seven. But I thanked her last night, and said how much I had enjoyed the week-end. It is very kind of her, Lance, to let me come so often; but over breakfast I made up my mind . . . this must be the very last time."

He eyed her amusedly as she swung down the drive in the wake of the departing trap. Then he stopped to light a cigarette, and watched her beautiful, troubled face over the flicker of flame in his cupped hands.

“Saada, you’re still turning over all we discussed last night . . . telling yourself that because you’re my secretary it’s not good for the discipline of the London office that you should be here. It’s all nonsense, Saada: surely a man can have with him the girl he loves, and as to what the rest may think——”

“Lance!” She regarded him steadily, her lips suddenly firm. I’m going to give you my answer now. Last night you asked me to marry you. I almost gave in. For hours I lay awake, turning each point over. I’ve decided . . . it would be—an—an appalling mistake.”

For one usually so impetuous, he took the decision—if decision it were—very calmly. Somehow, he felt, the letter, which as yet he had not shown her, would make all the difference to her final decision.

“An appalling mistake—to marry the man who worships you, and whom you love! You’ll concede that, dear; you do love me?”

They had turned into the wide road, a silver ribbon against the green shoulder of the hill. Below them, emerald fields of lush grass powdered with moon-daises stretched to the rose-clustered walls of Whitcombe with the stately spires and towers of Gloucester gilded by the early morning sun beyond.

Saada Medene set her hands on the stone wall behind her, and faced Lance Railsford gravely.

“I suppose I love you, Lance . . . though I’m

not quite sure, because, you see”—with a sad little shake of her head—“I’ve never really known what it is to love any man . . . except, of course, my own father. You’ve been ever so kind . . . and very generous, too, since that day—when . . . when, without a friend in London, without anything but a knowledge of languages, I asked you to find me something to do. Since then. . . . well! you know what’s happened. You have learned to care, and—perhaps I care, too. But I’m certain, if ever you married me, you’d very soon regret.”

“And why should I regret, sweetheart?” he repeated, taking from her long slender fingers the flower with which she was toying, and tossing it to the ground.

The girl’s head was lowered, and the wide-brimmed hat hid her eyes, deeply shadowed. “I’ve already told you, Lance . . . because of my race and blood. I’m a coloured girl, really—though, except for my name, few would ever guess so. Still, the fact remains, my father is an Arab . . . oh,” looking up suddenly, her face exquisitely flushed by the passion in her voice, “I’m not ashamed! My mother—well, she may have been European . . . I do not know, but in any case, you would have a girl of colour for your wife.”

His fingers reached out and lingered on hers caressingly.

“As if I care, darling! Aren’t you all the world to me? What does race matter? Isn’t an Arab as highly born as any English man or woman?”

Weren't your people noble—your father a sheikh, a man highly honoured? And you—you have all the instincts and feelings of a white girl."

Saada smiled even as she shook her head.

"My dear, eight years in French and English schools haven't changed the colour of my blood. I am, and always shall be—an Arab girl."

"Yet your face is fair, your skin as white as—my mother's."

"That is nothing," she said resolutely. "There are scores of white Arabs in Northern Africa, *roumis*, we call them, because of their partial Roman ancestry. For a generation, here and there, the white strain is uppermost: I sometimes feel it is uppermost in me. Apart from my dark eyes and hair, I am, as you say, as fair as any English girl. Yet the Arab blood remains—"

"You believe that makes any difference?" he questioned with swift vehemence.

"To you—now? Perhaps not. But to others . . . yes. Let me tell you. I have worked in your office, Lance, for two years. I haven't a friend, except you. Why? Because I made no secret of my birth or parentage. I admitted quite frankly that I was an Arab, my father Sheikh Medene, and my home in Tunis. You don't realize what a barrier the colour-streak forms. Because of my people, I am an outcast—"

"Don't, Saada, don't!" His fingers pressed upon her lips. The girl drew them away.

"It is true. Every one in the office looks down

on me: they don't like working beside me. I had resolved—when I was asked to Redlands this weekend, that it should be for the last time."

He nodded, but his voice had taken a masterful tone.

"Yes! For the last time, dear: because you are going to marry me. I won't hear any more excuses. You know you care for me: you can't look up and say you don't love me."

Her lips began to quiver.

"I can't! I can't! I do care—ever so much, and that is why I want to go away . . . and never . . . never see you again"

"Listen!" He held her wrists and drew her arms to her sides. "There is no one in the world you care for so much as you do for me?"

"No one —except my father."

"And you think you could be happy with me?"

"Were I of your race and colour—yes."

"Surely the risk is mine?"

"The risk is too great—here, in England."

"Wait. If some of the people you have met look down on you, it is because you are poor and unprotected—the way of the strong with the weak. But as my wife—"

"We should never be happy in England, Lance. An Englishman with a native wife is always an object of scorn."

"But in her own country?"

"Ah, then it would be different!"

“Exactly. You could be happy with me in Africa?”

“I—I think so,” she answered tremulously. “Both you and your mother have been so very kind—”

“My mother thinks always of me, Saada.”

“She would never consent to your marrying an Arab girl.”

Lance Railsford smiled as he unfolded the letter.

“On that score—trust me. Saada, I am off to Tunisia.”

Her eyes grew suddenly round.

“To Tunisia? Oh, how wonderful!”

“It is wonderful,” he said gaily. “You remember Curzon sent for me a fortnight ago? I was asked then if I would take a post in North Africa. Now I’ve been offered one—resident vice-consul at El Bouira—a growing frontier town. I want to take it because the salary is good. I shall go only on one condition.”

“Yes, Lance?” her voice falling to a whisper.

“That you promise to marry me. We shall be intensely happy out there under the sunny sky of Africa . . . and no one will bother whether you have Western or Eastern blood in your veins. Besides, what does it matter? . . . You will have me, and my love . . . always. Saada, will you come?”

For an instant she continued to look down, with her sweet mouth a-quiver, her lovely face sadly troubled. But the heart in her cried out for the

deep, full measure of a man's love. She raised her head.

"Yes, Lance," she said shyly. "If you want me, I will come."

An hour later Railsford was walking the odd five miles back to his mother's home on Birdlip Hill. He felt supremely happy and not a little elated with his victory. Indeed, any man might have felt proud of such a conquest. Saada Medene was superbly beautiful. Perhaps he was in love only with her physical loveliness: that is the thing for which most young men, with a narrow experience of life, love women. If deeper and more reverent emotions were lacking, Lance did not realize it; always a creature of impulse and temperament, having gained the point dearest and nearest his heart, he was satisfied.

He broke into the drive whistling a love-song. At last, it seemed, the Railsford star might rise again. There had been a time, long since, when this Golden Valley of smiling land and prosperous homesteads had stretched under Railsford rule from far-off Stroud to the fringes of the Malvern Hills. But time had stripped them of one rich possession after another, leaving the last of the line with only a small house, a peevishly discontented mother to keep, and a post in the Foreign Office at six hundred a year.

He was in no mood for regrets, as he crossed the tidy lawn towards the big cedar beneath which his mother sat. She saw by the smile on his good-

looking, sunburned face that something eventful had happened, and so far forgot her habitual gloom as to relax the fretful lines of her mouth.

“Well, dear! What has induced you to take a day off?” she asked, setting down her needlework. “Why haven’t you returned to town with Miss Medene?”

Lance drooped on to the grass and linked his hands about his hunched-up knees.

“Saada’s gone back to square things up at the office. I shall say good-bye to London at the end of a week. I’ve just heard from the Foreign Secretary.”

“A new appointment—at last?”

“H’m,” balancing his hat on one knee and slowly rocking his big form to and fro. “Something good this time. We’re going abroad.”

“Oh! Where? I hope it won’t be a horrid, out-of-the-way place. You know, Lance, I never could exist without my creature comforts.”

Railsford laughed, not unfeelingly.

“My dear mater, creature comforts, as you call them, would soon have been at a premium if this hadn’t come along. Six hundred won’t keep Redlands going any longer, and—”

“You ought to have married—a rich wife. There was a time when a Railsford—”

“Never mind, dear,” good-humouredly. “Things are going to look up from now on. We couldn’t have stayed here, anyway, with debts hedging us in all round. Redlands must have shared the fate

of the Hall . . . and then you'd have spent the rest of your days in Knightsbridge or Kensington. As it is, we're booked for Tunisia . . . and Saada is coming with us."

The placid look on Helen Railsford's face vanished.

"Saada? Whatever for? Surely you can do without a secretary?"

"I might do without a secretary, because I don't suppose the Foreign Office will let me run to one, but I—can't do—without a wife."

"You are never dreaming of marrying—her?"

She sat up very straight, the light of battle in her cold blue eyes.

The ghost of a smile played about the young man's mouth.

"I am. Saada and I became engaged—this morning. We arranged everything on the way into Gloucester. Curzon has given me the vice-consulship at El Bouira. Saada will come out with us, at any rate as far as Tunis, where, of course, she would put in some time with her father——"

"Lance, you must be mad." The blank astonishment had not yet subsided.

"I am mad—madly in love with her. I always have been—ever since she first came into my office. You've known it all along, surely?"

Helen Railsford looked away.

"I never dreamed you'd be such a fool. I knew Saada was useful to you, that her knowledge of Eastern languages had helped you in your work."

"To the extent of getting me one of the plums of the Service," Lance admitted with unusual candour. "I should never have got El Bouira but for Saada. Our engagement was inevitable."

"To a coloured woman! It's monstrous. You'll be a byword among all decent people."

He laughed a trifle uneasily.

"Oh, it won't be as bad as that. Saada isn't black. You couldn't tell her from an English girl, except that her hair and eyes are dark. Besides, the Arabs are highly civilized—at least the well-to-do classes are—and there's no one better born in all Tunisia. Her father is a sheikh——"

"Without means; now living in a derelict palace in Tunis. Well, I, for one, don't agree." She began to gather up her work. "If you choose to throw yourself away, when by waiting you might have had every girl in the country at your feet——"

"Waiting for what?" he asked, a contemptuous sneer on his handsome face.

She swept the balls of cotton into her lap.

"Your uncle's death. He's on his last legs already. Who besides ourselves can he leave his money to?"

Lance took out his case and tapped a cigarette on the back of his hand.

"Well, considering that you and he are bitter enemies, and he hasn't allowed me near him since I left school, I don't see that his phantasmal three-quarters of a million is worth bothering about. No, mother, you won't move me. Saada is more to

me than a very unlikely inheritance. I want to get married; I've found the girl I love; she cares for me, so that's all there is to it. Redlands must have been given up in any case; at El Bouira I shall have fifteen hundred a year—more than enough to keep you and a wife in comfort. We'll make a holiday of the trip across the desert——”

Mrs. Railsford emitted a sigh in which discontent, scorn, and surrender were equally commingled.

“I suppose I've no alternative. But you know my views . . . marriage to a girl with the colour-streak means social extinction. You might have waited . . . to see if Uncle Hugh relents. There's Norwiche and several hundreds of thousands for some one . . . some day.”

“It's the ‘some day’ which decides me!” laughed Lance. “I prefer to take my happiness now.”

Mrs. Railsford, looking inexpressibly grim, began to move towards the house.

“I can't help saying you're a fool, my dear. You might have had one of the finest seats in England, a position in society, a wife from the station to which you belong. Instead, you chose—an Arab girl. Mark my words, Lance—you'll live to regret it.”

For an instant he turned his mother's last phrase over in his mind. It was rather curious: they were almost the exact words Saada herself had used. But, with youth, passion has often the casting vote. He tossed the half-smoked cigarette away and followed his mother into the house.

CHAPTER II

THE DECISION

SAADA was quite happy in her engagement. To Lance she felt that she owed all that had come into her chequered life since the financial ruin of her father had taken her from an expensive English school and thrown her, friendless yet full of courage, on a curiously hostile world.

It would have been quite easy to return to Tunis, to the shelter of Sheikh Medene's house. At first Saada had been tempted to go; she felt for the aged man, who had always shown her both a mother's and a father's care, an affection which mounted to a passionate adoration. Yet it was this very devotion which kept her in England. From a servant of the once noble house of Medene she had learned of her father's great poverty and of the secret struggle he had long kept up to maintain her education. This decided Saada; from school she went to London, and from the first found a staunch friend and ally in Railsford, who had given her employment.

Ever since, week by week, her hard-earned savings had gone to support the broken old man languishing amongst the decayed splendours of his

Tunisian home. And now Saada herself was returning to him with the news of her engagement.

As she stood by the deck-rail of the magnificent Transatlantique steamer, pulsing steadily south, across the blue waters to the sun-kissed shores of Africa, she wondered what Sheikh Medene's attitude would be.

Always he had shown a great and respectful liking for English people; yet, from Kairouan to Casablanca, no son of the Prophet was prouder of his Arab blood. Still, Saada had taken the step, not unmindful of what it would mean to him. As Railsford's wife no longer would he need to bother about her future; rather, every penny that was her own would go to care for him in his last days.

This, indeed, was the outstanding feature of her unselfish nature, an intense and loyal gratitude. She had shown it in the complete surrender made to Lance's impetuous wooing. Because he had been so good a friend, because his home had thrown wide its door to bid her enter in a land alien and unsympathetic to her race, she had willingly promised to give the very most that any man could ask of a woman.

As yet she did not quite understand him. At times she doubted if he understood her. But complete ingenuous frankness on her side had marked every hour of the friendship which had brought the passionate declaration of his love. When Saada gave, it was characteristic of her to give with both hands—freely, unselfishly, without reserve. She

wanted to love Lance, to hold back nothing that might compensate him for his devotion.

His mother was more of an enigma to a nature so guileless as her own. There was about Mrs. Railsford's attitude a restraint which, though it scarcely bordered on hostility, yet at times suggested a scornful dissatisfaction. Saada knew that her Arab blood was the cause, and more than once, on the journey across, she discussed with Lance her willingness, for his mother's sake, to release him. Lance however, stood firm. Of his own free will he had made his choice, and no power on earth would shake him. He loved her for her beauty, her sweetness of disposition, her charm. Under the warmth of his avowal the little cloud dispersed, and he was perfectly happy when they arrived in Tunis.

Saada saw little of her father, for an early opportunity offered to get them comfortably to El Bouira. One of the Transatlantique Company's luxurious Pullman motors was due to leave on the Saturday following their arrival and would take them with all their baggage as far as Constantine.

She spent, however, three days in the once luxurious Arab house in the Rue Sidi Abdallah, still beautiful with its marble-paved courtyard and pillared doorways, yet stripped by the ruthless hand of poverty of the many treasures which had brought it fame.

Sheikh Medene, noble of bearing, with his long white beard and kindly face, and picturesque in his loose flowing robes, clung to her tightly and

cried like a child at their parting. For all this, he was happy; Saada had found a good husband who would cherish and protect her: more, a man of English blood. He gave them both his blessing, and returned, light of heart, to the solitude of his house.

At Constantine the difficulty of procuring camels to travel the rest of the journey delayed them; they put up at the Company's hotel overlooking the rushing torrent of the Rummell, and there in the care of Monsieur and Madame Caret spent three ideally happy days.

Lance meanwhile had pushed ahead with his plans. He had heard of a house at El Bouira which could be bought fully furnished when the present tenant gave up a few weeks hence. There was a church too, at the El Bouira, where he and Saada could be married, and in the interval, a comfortable hotel to receive his mother and his *fiancée* while he was up-country learning the details of his official duties.

Saada had just gone off to make purchases in the *souks* when the mail arrived. Mrs. Railsford, in a fever of excitement, found Lance in the blazing sunshine of the terrace, settling terms with an Arab camel-owner. He turned and saw by the unusual pallor of her face that something was wrong.

"You must leave me out of your calculations, dear," she said. "I must return at once to England."

"Oh!" he muttered, turning on her a look of blank astonishment. "What's happened?"

She flopped into a wicker chair and mopped her face.

"Your uncle Hugh is dangerously ill. This cablegram has been forwarded from Tunis—asking me to go to him."

"Of course you will go," he said slowly.

Helen Railsford's eyes were strangely bright.

"I must . . . for both our sakes. Whatever happens, I for one don't intend to run the risk of losing a fortune. You and Saada can go on to El Bouira, and when everything is over, one way or the other, I'll join you there."

Lance drew out his watch.

"Saada ought to be back long before this. However . . . I suppose she will soon come."

An hour lengthened into two; the noon train steamed eastward to Tunis, taking Helen Railsford back to England, but still Saada did not come.

Railsford felt little uneasiness over Saada's absence. Although Constantine is a rabble city, it is French garrisoned and governed, well-built and prosperous, with spacious roads and wide, open squares. Of course, there was an Arab town of narrow streets with overhanging houses, and shadowed courtyards filled with idle men, but it was hardly likely she would linger there with so much to attract her in the fine modern shops of the Place de Nemours.

Yet, indeed, it was the native quarter, with its silent-flitting veiled women in *rlilals* of gauzy pink and loose white dresses, and picturesque huddled forms drowsing in a sea of sunshine, that delayed Saada. In the shop of the armourer the previous afternoon she had looked at a beautiful sheathed dagger, richly damascened in silver and gold upon the finest steel. Lance had loved it for the sheer exquisite beauty of workmanship, but the price was beyond him.

So Saada, with her big generous heart, had nursed a secret. Before leaving Tunis, Sheikh Medene had forced upon her a tiny silken bag of gold coin, which through long years, he said, had been put by to form her wedding gift. To Saada had come the sudden inspiration to spend some of this money upon her sweetheart; almost guiltily she had stolen away back to the *souk* of the metal-workers. Her mission over, the strange lure of the East came upon her in those thronged, tortuous ways where men and women of her own flesh and blood lazed life away, chattering, sipping coffee, or squabbling among themselves over the price of a bargain.

Often enough, through the drear, cold days of an English winter, she had dreamed of blue skies and golden sunlight, of perfumed air and cool courtyards where the splash of the fountains in marble basins was the sweetest music in this land of perpetual afternoon.

She was back again in the world of her childhood

. . . in the shade of cream-washed walls painted purple and red with bougainvillea and cluster roses; and beyond, stately against the turquoise blue, the square towers and needle-like minarets of the mosques—the same graceful, slender daughter of the East, yet changed by her smart London frock and French shoes, and the strange Northern tongue that had become her own.

When she stopped before the bazaar of Hadji Ahmed, the seller of perfumes, she asked for jasmine and musk and attar of roses in the language of the *rhoumi*. Hadji Ahmed leered at her with his slumbrous brown eyes and gave her change only for a fifty-franc note.

Saada's pretty nut-brown cheeks flamed.

"I must ask you to give me the correct money," she said firmly. "I handed you a Bank of Tunis note for five hundred francs. My purchases come to thirty-five. You will give me four hundred and sixty-five change, or I fetch a gendarme."

At this Ahmed rose, and gathering the loose folds of his red silk *ghandourah* around him, hobbled to the back of his shop and called in a loud voice for Halek his son. A tall young fellow, brown of face, and sensuous of lip and eye, appeared, and after hearing his father's story, approached Saada with a coaxing smile.

"Indeed, there is no mistake, lady," he said, twirling his string of amber beads between his fingers. "We have not taken so much as five hundred francs this livelong day. Mohammed, the

Prophet, the Camel Driver and the friend of the poor, bear me witness. Here is all my father's money: if it pleases you, step inside and we will go through it together."

Saada's dark eyes flashed as he pulled out the drawer under the counter upon which Hadji Ahmed had sat cross-legged when the purchase was made.

"Indeed I will," she said, following the young man briskly. "And though you give me back my money—see, here are your perfumes, I do not want them—I shall still inform the police."

"That would be most unkind of the English lady," Halek said, quietly closing the shop door. "We should prefer to give all the money back. . . ."

"I am not English," Saada flashed back. "I am Arab, and it is a shame because you think a girl is English to try to rob her."

The young man bent nearer, for in the low-ceilinged room hung with Persian and soft-toned mats from Khordofan the light was dim—the sole illumination the yellow flame from the Moorish lantern hung from the raftered ceiling. The reek of a scented cigarette oppressed the close atmosphere; after the dazzling brightness of the hot afternoon, Hadji Ahmed's little back room seemed to Saada to belong to a far-away world.

"So you are native girl," purred Halek, taking the crimson rose from behind his ear and holding it caressingly under his thin, sensitive nose. "I like

native girl who spik English. You are pretty, too. I see," his eyes lighting with insolent admiration as he looked her up and down from the wealth of dark hair about her face to the tips of her dainty shoes, "you come from France or London to find rich young man among your own people?"

Saada's small head lifted proudly, and eyeing him contemptuously, she said,

"Will you please give me the five-hundred franc note and let me go. I have to get back to my hotel."

Halek glanced over his shoulder, and she could not help thinking what a fine figure he made in long silk robe and yellow turban.

"I am sorry you must wait," he said, his soft voice tinged with regret. "See," lifting the hanging that covered the middle glass door, "the shop is closed. My father has gone to drink coffee in the house of Choaib-el-Salim."

Saada picked up her purse.

"Thank you, I don't care to wait. I shall return later—with the prefect of police. Please stand aside."

But the tall young man only smiled, his big form interposed between her and the door.

"By the Prophet, I could not let thee go without one kiss from those sweet red lips," he laughed. "Come, I will caress thee as my sister . . . just once, and you shall go away."

For a wild moment Saada felt her courage streaming from her finger-tips. A coldness ran

down her spine; she essayed to speak, but her tongue clave to her mouth. She tried to put the low ebony and nacre-topped table with its tray of tiny gilt coffee-cups between herself and the young man. Halek, however, merely laughed, and reaching out as she cowered back, seized her slim wrist, and, though she struck him smartly in the face, his free arm encircled her waist.

He drew her close, knocking the table to the floor; the little cups shattered musically, and above the noise rose her sharp cry,

“Oh, don’t! Don’t! Please let me go.”

The scent of the crimson rose, gripped between his teeth, sickened her as he lowered his face, no longer dusky brown but flaming brick red; the rose dropped and petalled against her bosom . . . she screamed, this time with a shrillness that pierced the curtained windows and broke upon the quiet of the courtyard without. On the far side of the wall a dark, misshapen mass woke dazedly to life . . . a bundle of tattered garments that resolved into the semblance of a man. He rose stupidly, rubbing the torpor out of eyes steel-grey behind their mistiness; the blinding light struck at him less fiercely than that cry for help in his mother-tongue. The great arms, bare and brown as the dust in which he had lain, swung up and gripped the wall; six feet of wrecked manhood surged over the spiked top. He dropped with a thud that shook the breath from him, but recover-

ing, swayed across the sunlit court and reeled like a drunken man against the door.

The woodwork splintered beneath his great weight; the cry reached out again, and, driving his immense fist through the panel, he snapped back the catch and lumbered in.

Against the gloom the pallor of a girl's beautiful but agonized face called to him; there was a redness before his eyes, as, fastening a grip of iron upon the broad shoulders of Halek, son of Hadji Ahmed, he caught him up and threw him far across the courtyard. The scream of terror as Halek's battered body rose drowned the sobbing thanks which Saada, with her small hands clinging to her rescuer's shoulder, muttered against his breast. She clung to him, weak and trembling; and holding her like a child he moved towards the door.

In the path of sunlight that streamed from overhead he halted, staring about him uneasily, for Halek's cries had drawn a full dozen of his fellow-countrymen into the court. They crowded about him, hidden knives flashing from the sleeves and waistbands of flowing *ghandourahs*.

“Don't be afraid, little lady,” whispered the big Englishman, patting her arm. “We're in a tight corner, but I shall get you out. Take your parcel and follow me.”

Saada drew back, her frightened glance on the throng moving towards the door. In the struggle her hat had fallen to the floor; her dress was torn

and her abundance of thick hair flowed loosely about her shoulders. To the man she seemed adorably beautiful, so beautiful indeed . . .

“Quickly!” he said, and drawing her behind him he pushed resolutely forward, aiming a terrific blow at the first to bar his path. The crack of the Arab’s chin as he went down turned Saada faint; she saw the blood and bit her under-lip to keep back a cry of horror.

The Englishman blocked the door; she saw little but the leer of fiendish faces and the glint of long, curved blades: there was a second scream as Halek went down again, his face almost unrecognizable by the dreadful blows which her rescuer rained upon it; then as a knife gashed his arm from wrist to elbow he slammed the door to, and drew her towards the stairs.

“Come; there’s only one chance to get out alive,” he muttered. “In the next street, across the way, is the house of a friend. We may make it.”

They ran through a number of low-ceilinged rooms and by a short ladder reached the roof. From the parapet he leaned down and picked her up quite easily. He poised for the spring, jumped far out and landed heavily on the roof of the opposite house.

“This way—without a sound,” he counselled, lifting a wooden trap. “Hark! The street is filling. We cannot get away here. You feel quite safe with me?”

“Quite,” she whispered faintly, staring up at him

in the gloom of the walled chamber . . . a terrible figure in his ragged clothes. He set her upon a ledge against the wall and drew the iron bolt below the trap. Then tearing a strip from his tattered jacket, he endeavoured to bind his lacerated arm.

“Let me do it for you,” she said, rising and tearing a length from the softer material of her dress. “Oh, they have hurt you terribly!”

“It is nothing. One gets used to blood in these parts. I am thinking of you . . . how to get you out of this.”

A deafening clamour filled the air. Natives were flocking in from the winding alleys and tortuous side streets.

“We should find them as thick as hornets if we looked down from the roof,” he said, wincing under the pain as her deft fingers drew the edges of the wound together. “Yes! Give me a drink—but first take some yourself.”

She took a metal bowl from the floor and held it to his quivering lips. As he dropped back on the stone ledge, for the first time she had a sight of his face . . . once handsome and finely formed, now dissipated and reckless looking.

“What’s in there?” he asked suddenly, pointing to the long narrow parcel at her side.

“A dagger,” she replied. “I bought it in the *souk*, as a present for——”

“Give it to me. We shall need it if they find us here,” he said roughly, and tearing off the wrappings, threw them on the floor.

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"Is there no chance to get away?" she asked, suddenly afraid.

"None whatever!" he returned with brutal frankness. "You've got to stay here with me . . . until it's dark."

CHAPTER II

THE MAN OF DREAMS

SAADA tried to suppress a shudder. The fanatical screeches and the surge of feet on the rough cobbles below; the sight of this terrible figure with haggard and bearded face and ill-kempt clothes huddled against the stone wall; the long absence from the hotel and the dread of not getting safely back filled her with terror.

She was not by nature afraid. Struggling against Halek alone she had shown a fine courage. But there was something almost revolting about this strange Englishman, prematurely old, wrecked by the follies stamped on every line of his once handsome face.

Now the murkiness had come into his eyes again; he regarded her with a scornful smile.

“Come! I want you to talk to me,” he said in a voice curiously cultured for one so low down in the human scale. “Tell me what brings you, an English girl, to an Arab house.”

Her head lifted.

“I am not English. I am a native girl. My name is Saada Medene, and——”

“Nonsense,” he retorted, almost rudely. “That

won't do at all. You can't tell Forrester that tale. By the by"—drawing himself up quickly—"that's not my name, really. It belongs to a very great friend—and I speak of him so often, I get into the habit of using it. You'll forget, won't you; my name's Williams—John Williams, so remember that. What were we saying? Oh, I know!" pressing his hand to his forehead in an effort to remember; "about your being a native. Of course, it's all nonsense: you're an English girl; I knew . . . directly I heard your voice. You'll excuse me, won't you; I don't suppose I can offer one to you?"

He took from the belt about his ragged shirt—the latter was open at the throat and showed an expanse of broad chest and shoulder as burned and sun-tanned as the mud-baked wall against which he rested—a small metal box. The lid flew back and she saw a number of small black pellets, one of which he took between a well-shaped thumb and finger and eyed longingly before placing it in his mouth. Then a sigh of intense satisfaction escaped him, and leaning his head against the wall, he said in a more conciliatory tone,

"I'm glad to have been able to render you this service. You won't forget what I told you, though . . . about my name. It's Williams . . . not the other which I mentioned. By the way, what did I say?"

"I've almost forgotten," she answered nervously.

At that he laughed.

"You've almost forgotten. That's right. Now we can talk as friends again. You'll forgive me . . . for taking these things, won't you?" Again he opened the metal box. "One has to, you know, with a wounded arm. They help one to forget the pain."

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asked, struck by sudden compassion.

He shook his head, and a smile took all the bitterness out of his livid face. Slowly his eyes closed.

"Thanks! There's nothing you or any one can do. I—I'm beyond help. Lots of people think they can pull me up, when they find me here . . . like this. God! How this arm hurts."

She went closer and knelt by his side. She wished he would open his eyes.

"Wouldn't you like me to fetch a doctor?"

He laughed again, oddly she thought.

"Doctors can't do anything. I've seen lots of 'em. French and English, too. They know I'll only go my own way. No, the cut isn't hurting at all. I didn't say it was, did I?"

"I must try and find somebody."

He roused himself suddenly.

"If you go—you'll never get out alive. Hark at 'em now . . . sheer devils—howling for the life of a pretty English girl. I thought you were an angel when I saw you . . . in that room. It's getting

quite dark; you won't be going yet. I—I'm afraid to be alone. I want some one with me. I want you. . . . I say—you haven't gone? You're still here?"

His hand reached out and touched her arm. Immediately all fear vanished, and the woman in her returned.

"Yes, I am here still," she said softly.

"Thank, God," he muttered, and then his chin dropped to his breast, and he slid forward . . . and slept as would a child in the arms of its mother.

For a long time Saada sat thus, afraid to move lest she should disturb the sleeper. About the loose-limbed, ill-conditioned man in his torn, thread-bare clothes, was something distasteful to her sense of orderliness; yet there had been a look on his face, a gleam of wistful appeal in his eyes, which instinctively touched her heart. She remembered, too, how magnificently, and with what reckless courage, he had fought on her behalf . . . and the knowledge strengthened her to stand by him as long as he needed her.

As he showed no sign of awakening, she released him gently, then, creeping to the door, tried the handle. It was locked! She stared about her hopelessly. How long had elapsed since she first went into Hadji Ahmed's shop she did not know. The watch on her wrist, broken in the struggle, had stopped. The damascened dagger on the crude painted table—her intended wedding-gift to her

husband—was the closest reminder of the terrible experience through which she had passed.

High up in the wall a tiny window, shuttered and barred with a shield of ornamental painted ironwork, admitted slender pencils of red-gold light which lay in streaks of flame upon the Moorish tiled floor.

Cautiously she drew the table to the furthest wall. John Williams still lay in the shadows . . . an inert mass. She looked at him and wondered at the expression of ineffable peace upon his grey lips. He muttered something and stirred in his sleep; she caught the scarcely audible words,

“Williams—not Forrester. Don’t—forget—John Williams.”

As if she were likely to forget! A surge of gratitude warmed her to this broken man, still young, yet with the mark of years heavily on him. Her trembling hands raised her to the table; she looked out and swiftly drew her scared face away, for an angry mob still patrolled the street and fierce cries suddenly broke the quiet of the drowsy afternoon. They were hunting for her, or Williams—or both. She started as a voice came out of the darkness, and glancing over her shoulder, she saw Williams rising unsteadily to his feet.

“What are you doing?” he asked, laying a heavy hand on her shoulder.

She looked up into his rugged face.

“I want to go—back to my friends. They will be getting anxious.”

“Of course!” He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. His voice dropped to a thoughtful monotone. “You must consider them . . . but I must consider you. Have I slept long?”

“About two hours, I should think.”

He looked penitent.

“I am ever so sorry. Please forgive me. I felt very ill. It seems unkind to keep you shut up with me. Yet I dare not let you go. Listen! You hear that!” He raised his hand. “The heathen rage ever so wickedly. Is that correct? I do not know. It is so long since I read a prayer-book. They scream to Allah to give them the blood of the Christian dogs. Bah! It was an unlucky stroke of fortune that brought you here.”

“You don’t think it would be safe to try——”

He shook his head.

“I shan’t let you. You are in my care. I am responsible to your friends. Your blood would be on my own head. God knows, it carries enough already. You must trust yourself to me, till it is dark and all is quiet. Then I can take you, by a way I know, over the flat roofs and lead you right into the Rue Liblanc. You will be safe then.”

“You are very kind.”

His eyes shone.

“It is nothing—only what any Englishman would do for one of his own countrywomen. But . . . let me think; how my memory fails me!” holding his hand to his forehead. “Didn’t you tell me you were a native girl?”

She nodded.

“Yes. My name is Saada Medene . . . and I am staying at the Transatlantique hotel on the road out of the town looking towards the Rummel and the El Kantara bridge. My father, Sheikh Medene, lives in Tunis. I was born in Tunis.”

He was looking at her in a dreamy, far-away fashion, searching every line of her beautiful face and form.

“It is strange. I see nothing of the native about you. You are dark, but neither your hair nor eyes are Arabian. No, it can’t be; there is a mistake somewhere. And your voice . . . it is so typically English . . . I am sorry I interrupted you. You would like something to eat.”

“I am hungry—and very thirsty,” she admitted. He fetched a derelict cushion from a dark cupboard and set it on the ledge.

“Sit there. I can offer you both food and drink—of a sort. By the grace of God, and the generosity of an Arab friend, to whom once I rendered a service, I am allowed to live here. This,” with a wave of his hand which took in the uncarpeted floor and bare walls, “is my home. You will take a little wine?”

Saada began to feel more at ease. The rough, almost brutish manner had gone, given place to an old-time courtesy. He spoke and behaved like a gentleman. There was unmistakable breeding in every line, every movement of the ill-conditioned figure as he crossed the room and brought from the

cupboard a wine-jar, a glass and a box of crudely-made native cakes and biscuits. She ate and drank eagerly, hoped he would share the frugal meal.

He negatived the suggestion with a lift of his hand.

“I never eat. Sometimes I take a little water. My meat and drink are here,” and he brought out the tiny metal box.

Her eyes darkened.

“They are not good for you, I’m afraid,” she said chidingly.

At this he laughed.

“It is a form of *haschish*, Miss Medene. I should die without it. But for once—out of respect for you—I will forgo,” and he slipped the box back into the folds of his ragged shirt. As he stood there, in the middle of the wretched room, the westering sun fell upon his tired face. A slow change came over it: the thin mouth gradually lost its weakness; she saw the muscles of the lean jaw flex and the grey eyes took on a brightness denied them through many weary days. The big capable hands rose and fell: he caught her curious watching glance, and the long arms dropped to his side. Then he took a step forward, and coming to the ledge, sat down at her side.

“You’ve done more for me than I reckoned any human had the power to do,” he said gravely.

“Oh!” she answered, staring ahead into the gloom. “In what way?”

He bent his elbows on his knees and propped his chin in his hands.

“You’ve helped me to remember . . . I was once a man.”

Her voice rose on the strained silence.

“Once a man! What do you mean? You are a very fine man—to do all you have done for a defenseless girl.”

A bitter laugh escaped him. He took the lapels of his torn jacket, and holding them, stared down at himself.

“Look at me! Can you call me a man? . . . A battered, loathsome semblance of what I might have been. A drug fiend . . . yes, that’s what I am; a horrid speck in the dregs of civilization washed up by most mixed Oriental cities. Do I disgust you, Miss Medene?”

She shook her head and regarded him with melancholy.

“No, but you sadden me. Isn’t there anything I can do?”

His lips parted contemptuously.

“You! You—do anything for a piece of human flotsam like me? There’s not a soul under heaven could lift me out of the slime . . . even if I wanted to be lifted.”

“But you do want to be lifted,” she said earnestly. “You proved it, a moment ago, when you put that dreadful box away. You know . . . I will help you, if I can. Won’t you . . . won’t you try?”

In her sweet womanly sympathy she allowed her white fingers to touch his shoulder. He drew away as though the contact seared him.

“Don’t!” he said thickly. “You make me feel . . . ashamed.”

Her voice was full of compassion now.

“Isn’t it good sometimes to feel ashamed? You are not happy—like this.”

“I was happy once,” he said, looking up. “But it was a very long time ago—so long that until you spoke of it . . . I . . . I had almost forgotten. There was a time—when I was like you—full of youth and strength. . . . My God, how good it was to live!”

“Cannot it be good again?”

“No.” The fine head with the matted brown hair, flecked about the ears with tiny strands of silver-grey, moved sideways. “The past is done with. I shall go on to the end, sinking lower and lower until . . . I find forgetfulness. I try to now: generally, my mind is numb—and you—you are trying to make me remember.”

“Only for your own sake,” she said softly.

A slow smile crept up about his mouth. The clearly-cut sensitive nostrils quivered ever so slightly. He turned on her a haggard, pained glance.

“It sounds strange to hear words of comfort from the lips of a young girl. And yet . . . you don’t mind my telling you this?”

“Of course not.”

"It was a girl like you who brought me down. Does that sound cowardly?"

"In a way—yes," she answered. "A man should be the captain of his own soul."

"So you think!" He smiled bitterly. "A man gives his soul to the woman of his choice . . . at least, I did, or I shouldn't be here now. Once I was full of hope and vigour. Love was my life, as perhaps it is yours."

"I don't know," she answered thoughtfully. "Men and women have other things in life besides love."

"Then they aren't in love," he flashed back promptly. "I know now that I wasn't in love. Three long happy years I thought I was. That woman was the world to me. Then my luck turned: my prospects went, and her affection went, too. That was how I came to find myself."

His fingers began to move blindly towards his vest. She closed them in a warm friendly clasp and drew them away.

His glance met hers challengingly.

"Why shouldn't I?" he began . . . halted, looked down and, breathing a deep sigh, relapsed into silence.

"Would it be safe for me to go now?" she asked. He looked up at the bars of light, touched with changing hues of amber and tawny gold.

"Not yet. When the muezzin calls the last prayer from the Djama Salah Bey, the big mosque at the end of the Place Negrier, it will be dark.

We shall hear him, 'Allah Akbar, ayah salat'—you know the words? 'Allah only is Great: there is but one God, and Mahomet is his Prophet. Allah is Great.' Don't you say them every day?"

"Not now," looking him between the eyes. "You see, I am a Christian. My father was Mahomedan. When I had been a little while in England I felt the need to change my faith. In the Christian religion I found something more satisfying than the beliefs of Islam."

"But surely your father——"

"I told him when I reached Tunis a little while ago. At first he was sad, but he said, 'What will be, will be. It is Allah's wish.' I do not believe I could have become engaged to an Englishman and remained a Mahomedan."

"Then you are engaged . . . to be married?"

His tone was quite passionless.

"Yes. I am staying with my *fiancé* and his mother at the hotel. His name is Railsford . . . perhaps you have heard it. He used to be in the Consular service in Algiers."

Williams shook his head.

"I have never heard the name. What were we saying when you talked about having to go?"

She rose and moved towards the window, looking up at the interlaced woodwork. The fading twilight painted the upturned face with a warm, flushed rosiness that added to her wondrous beauty.

"You were telling me about the sadness in your life."

He stretched himself to the full height of his magnificent stature and began to pace the narrow room with slow, grave strides.

"It is nothing," he said, something of his old recklessness returning. "The woman threw me over, that's all. I became a bad egg, and have remained one ever since. I drifted East, and you know what that means to a man who has nothing to live for."

"You have yourself," she rebuked gently.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Myself! What am I?" contemptuously. "A scrap of human wreckage thrown up by the under-current of an Oriental city. I stay here, in Constantine, so that I may live as I shall die . . . unknown."

Saada turned, and her face was lit by a sympathetic smile.

"You are not to think of yourself alone," she replied, reaching up and laying her palm against his shoulder. "Won't you believe that in me you have a friend?"

He laughed in quiet derision.

"Yes! A friend whom I shall never see again." Then, a change coming over him, "All the same, I shall treasure the memory . . . and sometimes, when I am tempted to sink——"

"But you are not going to sink lower," she said

bravely. "You are going to make a great fight, to win your way back again to the level of other men."

His hand closed over hers suddenly.

"I wonder—is it worth while?" he questioned, regarding her wistfully. "There is so little left to build upon."

"And yet so much," she answered gravely. "The sympathy of a friend will help you. I will stand by you; Lance will, too. He is ever so good."

"The man you are to marry?"

"Yes. We are leaving Constantine shortly for El Bouira. Won't you come to see us there? Perhaps, if you want a helping hand, Lance would find you something to do."

"Why should he?" the man asked.

"Because," she assured him, "you have done so much for me. You saved me from something—ugh!"

"We won't talk about it. In a little while you will be safe in your hotel."

"But you will come to see us?"

"Perhaps."

"Why do you say that?"

He spread his hands in a gesture of self-contempt.

"How can I come as I am? No decent people would want to know me."

"I want to know you. Won't you promise——"

"To try and give up this thing?" tapping the belt at his waist.

"Yes," she said. "Give me your word. I know you'll never go back."

"Don't you think so?"

Her eyes were shining with a serene light.

"I am sure of it. Something tells me . . . you will win through."

For a long minute he was silent. Then he held out his hand.

"I promise . . . to put up a fight, little lady . . . and if ever I do win through I will come to El Bouira . . . just to show you that I have made good. See, it is quite dark: in a very little while you will be safely home."

Saada looked up. The advantage of his great height had enabled Williams to raise the trap in the low ceiling; she saw a square of purple sky, hazy with the faint luminance of stars.

She smiled bravely, though the dread of the unknown still lurked in the background of her mind.

"You think it is quite safe to try?"

Long since she had lost all fear of him; it seemed quite natural to look to him for protection.

"As safe as anything ever is by night in the native quarter of an Arab town. It will require nerve to jump from one roof to another. You aren't afraid . . . to trust yourself to me?"

She met his serious questioning with a steady gaze.

"Haven't I trusted myself to you all this time? Of course I'm not afraid. Why should I be?"

"I don't know," he answered awkwardly, as he lumbered across the room towards her and looked down sheepishly at his rough attire. "I'm hardly the type to inspire confidence. May I lift you?"

An hour since she might have shuddered at his touch. But time had brought an understanding of John Williams; she knew that her sympathy and faith had touched the man in him, and that for a time, at any rate, the brute in his nature was conquered.

She made the slightest motion of assent and stood quite still as his big brown hands caught her by the waist. Then he raised her until her hands touched the side of the trap and she was able to draw herself into a sitting position.

"Can you manage?" she asked, watching his fine figure moving to and fro in the gloom.

"Just give me your hand. Sit tight when you feel my weight! So!" Her soft, warm fingers closed on his: a surge of feeling swept through him at the touch; he fought it down, and leaping upward, caught the ledge. A moment later they crouched together on the flat roof, breathing heavily with the effort of their exertions.

Her eyes smiled at him through the peachy blueness of the night; he caught the white glint of her teeth against the vivid scarlet of her lips, and a self-satisfied laugh escaped him.

"I wonder—what your people would think, could they see us now. I—I almost wish . . . I'd never met you."

She shook her head as she sat there, recovering her breath.

"You shouldn't say that. I might, by this time, have been dead."

"Or worse," he muttered thickly. "These parts are no place for a white woman after dark."

"You forget"—merrily—"I am Arab."

"Of course." He passed his hand over his forehead and brushed back the thick cluster of dark hair. "I—so easily forget. Tomorrow, perhaps, almost all you have been kind enough to say will have gone from my mind. But I will try to remember—I promised, didn't I?"

"You did indeed," she answered encouragingly. "And when we meet again you'll have such wonderful things to tell me. You will say, 'I haven't fallen back! I've stuck to my guns, and I'm winning through.' Won't that be splendid?"

He leant closer, a heavy mass against the sharp whiteness of the parapet; the slight warmth of his breath touched her cheek.

"Why—why do you take all this interest in me?"

She looked up into the straight grey eyes, heavy with pain.

"I—I don't know. I simply can't tell you; unless it is . . . you saved my life. Of course I shall never forget that. Always I shall think gratefully of you, and I shall hope that, very soon, you'll be the fine strong man you used to be."

He laughed almost mockingly and shook his massive head to the stars.

"Good Lord, I'm as strong as a horse—as a lion, tonight. I could do wonderful things, if only . . ." He checked himself and held out his hand. "Come along," he said curtly. "I've kept you too long already."

"Have we far to go?"—rising.

"A goodish way. Some of the roofs adjoin. At others there is a leap. No one takes the slightest notice—except when a guilty Arab takes this way to visit his lady friends. Then, often enough, there is a shriek in the dark, and later his body is found sweltering in the sun. Life doesn't count overmuch with them."

They moved forward, quickly putting several streets between them and the scene of their first meeting. A stillness had descended on the town. Saada saw she was at a great height, and marvelled until she remembered that the ancient city is built upon a block of rocks rising perpendicularly nearly a thousand feet above the surrounding countryside. The restless murmur of the River of Sand added its music to the hushed sounds of night life in the native quarter, and afar off a crescent moon silvered the rugged line of the distant mountains.

Beyond the sable windings of the ravine the cultivated fields were darkened here and there by olive groves. And against the blackness of one they caught the white glint of a marabout's tomb.

"Your friends will be getting anxious?"

The man's cultured voice broke in upon her reflections.

"I'm afraid they will," she replied in a detached sort of way. "My *fiancé* will be wondering what has happened. I left the hotel before noon, and now——"

"It is past eight, I'm afraid. However, you won't be long now. This ladder leads to a courtyard with an open door. Let me go first, in case you stumble."

Once more she surrendered herself quite willingly to his strong clasp, and allowed him to grip her hand as he drew her into a narrow shadowed passage.

"You had better leave me now," she said, as they struck into the well-lit Place du Palais.

"I'm afraid not," he replied with grave determination. "You have a good mile to go along a badly lighted road. I shan't leave you until you reach the hotel."

Her eyes kindled.

"That will be splendid. I want you to meet Lance."

"Who's Lance?" he asked abruptly, puckering his brows.

"Don't you remember?" she said. "The man I'm engaged to—Mr. Railsford. I told you . . . when we were in that room."

Williams drew his wandering thoughts together with a great effort. The effect of the drug had not yet entirely vanished.

"Yes—I do recollect . . . something. And didn't you tell me—you had been in England?"

Saada nodded.

"My father sent me to England to be educated. To Paris first . . . then I was at school four years in Tonbridge. After that I went to London."

"London," he repeated. "It seems ages since I was there. How is it in these days? I haven't been to England since before the war."

"I saw very little of it really." Her manner had become grave. "You see, I had to work to keep myself. My father lost all his money. He used to be one of the richest sheikhs in Tunisia. Then misfortune came . . . and he lost everything except his house. I couldn't stay at school after that —so I just took the only job for which I was fitted. I became a translator of Arabic for Mr. Railsford at the Foreign Office."

"And now you are going to marry him?"

She was conscious of Williams' glance searching her face.

"Yes," she said slowly. "We are to be married almost as soon as we reach El Bouira. I told you that, too. Your memory is very bad."

"It is the wretched drug," he said heavily. "I've brought myself to a terrible state. So," as though repeating the words to himself, "you—are—to be married very soon." The sigh that left him did not escape her. "It seems strange you should marry an Englishman."

"It is strange," she agreed. "And yet I don't feel like an Arab. All my thoughts and inclina-

tions are English. I suppose—because I've lived so long in your country."

"Will you ever go back?"

"I think so . . . one day. Mr. Railsford must return to London before he takes up another post elsewhere. One never knows where it may be—China, the Far East, Turkey. But I'm glad to be back in North Africa again."

They walked the next quarter of a mile over the dusty rise in silence. Williams had relapsed into moody reflection. Something of the buoyancy which he had shown in his squalid lodging had left him; he walked heavily, as a man long denied the power of sleep.

Saada's heart went out in sympathy.

"When you get back, promise . . . you will rest?" she asked.

"Yes, I will rest," he said drowsily.

"Without touching the drug." Then, a fresh thought striking her, "Don't you think you had better give the box to me?"

"No," he said almost roughly, "it is mine. I prefer to keep it."

She accepted the rebuff good-naturedly.

"Very well! This is the hotel. You will come in—"

"Thank you. I prefer to get back."

"But Lance—"

"I have no wish to meet him, or any one . . . in my present state."

"Please don't talk like that. You promised not to be hopeless."

"Did I?" His manner softened as he caught her pained glance. "I am sorry. Forgive," and he held out his hand.

"Will you come—before we go?" she asked. "We shan't leave for a couple of days."

Williams drew himself to his full height. She noticed the swift heave of the broad shoulders, the squaring of the long jaw.

"If you don't see me you'll know I've gone under. Then you needn't bother any more."

"If I don't see you I shall come and find you," she said firmly. "I should know the house again. So until we meet again—good-bye."

A mysterious smile flitted over his face: their fingers met in a warm clasp, lingered a moment; then he drew away, and as a voice called to her from the terrace he turned and swung down the white dusty road.

CHAPTER IV

THE SHADOW

“**S**AADA, wherever have you been?” Lance Railsford came swiftly across the terrace, his voice edged with sharpness, as peering beyond her he watched the tall figure of Williams disappear into the night.

“I met with a most extraordinary adventure,” she said calmly. “To begin with, I lost my way in the *souks*. . . .”

“To begin with,” he repeated irritably, “you had no business to go alone into the *souks* at all. You know my wishes in the matter.”

“But, Lance——”

“Don’t make excuses. You’ve no right to follow your own sweet will regardless of other people’s feelings. It’s a side of your character which I won’t put up with.”

She looked up coldly into his flushed, angry face.

“If you will only be reasonable——”

He cut her short with a gesture of impatience.

“Be reasonable! Good Lord! Is it reasonable for a girl to set off alone and wander at this time of night through the native quarter . . . and then return, lamely excusing herself, in the company of a

strange man? If this is what the return to your beloved East means . . . ”

His sniff of derision whipped a spot of angry colour into her cheeks. She faced him, calm-eyed, but secretly furious.

“I think, Lance, you forget yourself. At least behave like a gentleman.”

The rebuke sobered him.

“It’s all very well for you to take the high hand. I’ve had a most horribly anxious time. You left before eleven. Half an hour later mother received a cable calling her to England.”

Saada’s anger melted.

“Nothing serious, I hope, dear?” she asked in a conciliatory voice.

He walked the terrace with quick, impatient strides, every now and then glancing back along the road which Williams had taken.

“Serious enough,” he muttered brusquely. “My uncle Hugh has been taken ill, and I suppose he wants mother to nurse him. Haven’t even heard of him for years; now, when he needs somebody——”

“Lance, dear, you are in a very bitter mood tonight. Don’t be angry.”

He glowered at her.

“But I am angry, so what’s the use of denying it? I had to help the mater scramble her things together: she’s gone, without your saying good-bye to her . . . and, goodness knows, she’s none too friendly disposed to you as it is.”

“What?”

The words had slipped out almost before he realized their significance. Saada was regarding him with a hurt expression.

"Well, what I mean is," he equivocated, "she never has been any too friendly, and now you've absolutely offended her by going off on your own sweet pleasure and . . ."

A great fear knocked at Saada's heart. All the same, her voice was restrained.

"You have told me something you have never mentioned before. Mrs. Railsford does not approve of me because of my Arab blood. Is that what you mean?"

There was something in the perfect control of voice and emotions that he began to feel afraid of. Perhaps he had gone too far. . . .

"Oh, I don't know. You made me very angry, and I spoke hastily," he replied in more conciliatory tones. "I don't care a button what other people think or say. I want you for myself—"

She stood full in his path, and the tall graceful figure seemed suddenly to have added to its height. Her brown hand came to rest on his sleeve.

"Wait a moment; don't go in just yet. I want to talk to you."

"But dinner's ready. You must be tired and hungry. The gong sounded half an hour ago," he said, hedging unskilfully.

Saada forced the ghost of a smile.

"Thank you, I'm not hungry. I want to know why you said . . . what you did a minute ago."

You told me—when we discussed this question before our engagement—that your mother had no objection to your marrying me. You know, Lance,” her voice suddenly becoming tender, “I care for you well enough to release you . . . rather than she should be unhappy.”

The sight of her standing there in the moonlight, the peerless loveliness of face and form, the subtle perfume of her hair, the haunting sadness in her dark eyes, swept the last shred of reserve away.

“Darling, don’t talk like that!” he slipped his arm about her with passionate warmth. “You know I love you more than any woman in the world. Only I was very angry: I do want to see mother and you the best of friends, and this foolishness on your part promised to raise a barrier, that’s all. She wasn’t well pleased at going off without your being there to say good-bye. Now tell me . . . all that happened.”

The girl drew a slow breath of relief. She wanted to make Lance happy—for all his goodness to her.

“I met with an adventure. The first part was decidedly unpleasant.”

“Oh!” His mind flew back to the stranger. “I was kept shut up in a room at the back of a native bazaar. I went there to buy several things. A young Arab tried to make love to me. He wanted me to kiss him——”

“Good God!”

“I struck him. Then, when he took hold of me,

I cried out, and an Englishman came to my rescue."

"By Jove, that's lucky! Who was he?"

She looked away, but the white ribbon of road was deserted now.

"He told me his name was Williams . . . a tall, big fellow."

A derisive laugh left Railsford.

"Oh, I've heard of him." His sensitive upper lip lifted in contempt. "Williams, the dopey man of Constantine . . . the biggest blackguard that ever disgraced a fine name."

Saada winced at the scorn in Railsford's voice. But just as quickly came the instinct to fight the cause of the man who was down.

"I shouldn't like to call him a blackguard, Lance," she said, a strange tenderness underlying her words. "He may have been weak and foolish —to give way as he has done. But I've seen another side of his character, as fine as any man could possess. The way he pulled me through was simply splendid."

Railsford was idly caressing his close-clipped dark moustache, and still staring beyond her towards the lights of the city twinkling on the rocky crest of the hill.

"Well, what did he do?" he asked. "He appears to have made a creditable impression on you."

The girl purposely ignored the scarcely-veiled sneer. For the first time since she had known Railsford she was experiencing a sense of repugnance.

"I wonder how you would feel if you had been in my position—at the mercy of a beast? John Williams came and taught the fellow a lesson he will never forget. A score of other Arabs heard his shrieks and swarmed round us. Mr. Williams had to fight his way through. He was as brave and strong as a lion. I saw four men go down. But, of course, he couldn't beat them all, so he took me by a narrow little staircase to the roof, and sheltered me in his own room till night came on."

Railsford, regarding the cameo-like beauty of her face against the darkness, was suddenly conscious of a deep, uncontrollable jealousy. Another man had obviously awakened an interest in her.

"I suppose he did what any other decent Britisher would have done," he said with cutting sarcasm. "You can't imagine a white man allowing—"

"That is why I don't like to hear you speak of him dear . . . as you did," she remonstrated. "He can't be such a blackguard. . . ."

He swung round sharply and she caught the swift glint of anger in his eyes.

"I tell you, Saada, the fellow's an irreclaimable brute, a public disgrace . . . and I don't want you to have anything to do with him. Of course—if a sum of money would meet—"

The blood rushed and flamed to the roots of Saada's hair. She felt like giving Lance a good shaking.

"I don't know what's come over you tonight, Lance. You're not at all your usual self. Why

insult this man because he has fallen? Don't you think, if he had been the sort to repay with money, I should have offered it? He asks nothing, wants nothing but your sympathy and mine."

"Did he say so?" Railsford asked foolishly.

Her lip curled.

"Of course he didn't. But I understand men well enough to know when a kind word, a friendly look, means everything. John Williams promised me . . . to give up this drug-taking, and——"

"My dear girl," he said, faintly amused, "I never yet met a dopey man who wouldn't promise anything. It's part of the disease . . . the exhibition of maudlin sentiment which accompanies vows of regeneration. Where does this fellow live?"

"In a room in the native quarter." ,

"You would know the place again?"

"I think so. Why?"

"I should like you to go there now," he answered in a self-satisfied way. "You would find this John Williams . . . by the by, that's only an *alias*; his real name is John Brandreth Forrester, and he belongs to one of the best families in Leicestershire . . . I've no doubt you'd find him dead to the world with *haschish*, or whatever beastly stuff he takes, about as unworthy an object of compassion as one could find."

"I'm sorry, but I don't agree." Saada fell in at his side as he slowly walked the length of the terrace. Below them, the voice of the ever-swirling Rummel was full of strange whisperings that

stirred again the emotions Williams had awakened in her. "My faith in him is unshaken, Lance. I believe he will keep his promise to give up this drug-taking and win through."

"And if he does?"

Lance eyed her critically. The moonlight showed the sudden surge of colour in her cheeks and the quick brightening of her eyes.

"I shall be very glad," she said, clasping her small hands together. "I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I helped him—that I made some return for all he did for me."

Her sweetness swept him with a chill of shame. How petty and how despicable his ungenerosity compared with her bigness of heart! He drew her nearer. The warmth of her body against his own swept the last of his bitterness away. With a hushed murmur of passion he placed his hands upon her shoulders and reverently lowered his lips to hers. For a moment neither spoke; he looked away as he saw the tears, swelling under the dark lashes, break upon her cheeks.

"I'm ever so sorry. I was jealous." His manner was penitent. "Something seemed to get hold of me when I saw you two together. I watched from the end of the balcony. I saw him take your hand . . . and hold it. I thought—he was going to kiss your fingers. And when you looked up into his face you were smiling . . . as I remember you smiled at me the night you promised to be my wife. . . .

She pressed her warm palms against the back of his hands and her eyes were filled with a great longing.

"I want to see other people—everybody—just as happy as I am." Her voice was vibrant. "I have so much. God has been so good to me. My heart is full. Lance, don't be bitter because it overflowed to this poor human wreckage."

Railsford shook his dark head.

"Yes, that's what he is, I'm afraid—a piece of flotsam thrown up by the back waters of an African town. There is no hope of salving him, really. When he gets quite sodden he'll just go to the bottom, and neither you nor I will ever find him."

"We must! We must!" she said vehemently. "I promised I would. Always I shall be ready to put out a helping hand."

"But, sweetheart . . . next week we shall be in El Bouira, and it's a thousand to one against our ever staying in Constantine again."

"I know where he lives," she said thoughtfully. "A letter from us will find him—perhaps help him ever so much when he's tempted to slip back. And if you should meet him, I want you to be kind—because he risked his life for me."

A spark of generosity momentarily flamed in Railsford's heart.

"I didn't realize it at first, Saada. I suppose I ought to admit . . . this man gave you back to me."

"That's what it amounts to," she replied, sud-

denly becoming practical. "But for him I shouldn't be here now. You would never have seen me again."

"Was it really as bad as all that?"—in a hushed whisper, and his clasp tightened. He caught the swift rise and fall of her bosom as she laboured under the remembrance of the dreadful experience.

"They were quite mad, Lance. Most of them carried knives. One brute slashed Mr. Williams' arm. I bound it up as best I could . . ."

He held her very fast, and his eyes were shining with the light of longing. Never before had she seemed so desirable. The warm glow of passion which her nearness always brought kindled to a white heat of desire. This thought of hers for another man was torture inconceivable. He hated to think that those little brown hands had soothed the drug fiend in his pain. His face was lowered.

"Dearest," he whispered, "you do belong to me . . . every little bit of you?"

"Of course," she said, smiling up at him. "I've never given you cause to feel otherwise."

"And you will always be the same?"

"As long as you love me, yes."

"You know I love you."

Her lips tried to frame the answer in her heart. Deep down, a little fear was stirring, brought to life by this revelation of a side of his character hitherto unsuspected and unknown. Then she said, very slowly,

"I believe you do, Lance. Only sometimes"—her voice breaking—"I feel afraid."

He put her a little away from him and regarded her with a puzzled expression on his handsome face.

"Afraid, dearest . . . of what?"

But Saada could only shake her small head. She could not tell whence they came, or what was the nature of her fears. There is in the hearts of women an instinct which affords them glimpses into the unknown.

CHAPTER V.

WHISPERING DEVILS

A WORLD of mud-baked walls whose sole light was the small high window through which heat more than sun penetrated in a perpetual drowsy stream that dulled the senses and stifled hope; the drear drab world of John Williams, once a gentleman.

He stared at it dully in the fitful glow from the candle held in his shaky hand. A little hour of life, born by the presence of a wonder-woman, was gone; he was back again—crushed by the walls, stifled by the oozing heat, despairing in the great moonlit silence. The guttering flame, as he set it on the stone ledge upon which she had sat, smothered the bars of silver that struck from one wall to the other. He stared at the ledge—to him it was an altar whereon lay the deadest of dead hopes.

Tonight had shown him a vision—the vision of a woman's heart and of a woman's love . . . not the carnal affection of passion, but the love which is so divine that it can reach down and lift from the mire such vileness as he. He sank down, his long legs crossed under him in the fashion he had learned from the Arabs long years before, and tried to fill the room again with her presence. The

attempt to recall her physical beauty, the glory of hair and face and eyes, the graceful figure, was a failure; but something finer, stronger, remained . . . the music of her voice, the sweetness of expression, the wistful yearning of the glance bent on him in hope.

Why should he think thus of her? Why think of her at all? The folly of it struck him as incongruous; he laughed derisively at himself, and the hand that long had toyed with the box in his belt lost its indecision. He snapped back the lid and stared in dreamy fascination at the little heap of black pellets. In each was wrapped the power of forgetfulness . . . the pain of remembering what and who he once had been.

Across the amber glow that lay upon the crude tiles a shadow fell. He turned with a start, peering over his shoulder, and his finger-nails drummed shakily upon the lid of the box. It was closed now, and the shadow gone. Whose was it, and whence had it come?

He asked the question a score of times, pacing his lone prison and always cheating himself of the answer. There was a gnawing in his body; an ache of soul, too, so grievous that solace lay only in oblivion. Deep down within him something stirred furtively; under the sun-tan of his shrunken cheeks a pallor crept till it whitened his face from brow to chin. The breath of the drug glowed in his veins, the voices of the whispering devils were already

busy in his ears . . . the lid slipped back, the pellet touched his lips . . . and at the touch the man in him awoke. With a moan like the cry of an animal in pain, he looked back and once more saw the shadow on the floor; but even as he stared in horrified amaze the dim lines faded: the nebulous shape vanished and before him stood Saada Medene. He looked into a face radiant with a great love; saw her arms outstretched in pleading. The flame of the candle guttered, went out, and across the white streamers of light from the window hurtled the small black box that had brought him to ruin.

With a groan of despair Williams dropped back to the ledge and there sat like a figure carved in wood, his mouth resting on his wrist. When, after a while, he lifted his head and stared with childish, expectant eyes at the crazy door, as if some power could bring again the girl of his dreams, the marks of his strong teeth showed against the sun-tan of the skin.

The silence, the hopelessness of his position became intolerable. He stood up, peering at the window through which he had thrown the box; and then, with both palms pressed against his eyes, he began again that ceaseless pacing of his prison. The craving for movement ebbed and flowed as the desire for the drug alternately deepened and was conquered.

At times he made unconscious movements with his arms, sagging and reeling from one wall to another, and beating his clenched fists upon the hard,

dry earth. This was his danger hour, and he knew it . . . the contest deliberately taken up for the sake of one almost a stranger to him. In his eyes was a dreadful luminance: the torture fires of the damned. His fingers brushed back the moist hair from his clammy forehead; it was wet with dew, yet his lips were parched and burning.

For an hour the craving held him. With nothing to aid but the remembrance of a woman's touch and a woman's voice, he struggled on till physical exhaustion drove him to the ledge again. But now he discovered he could think coherently, frame one thought after another from the moment of his first meeting with Saada to the time when she had clasped his fingers in farewell. The knowledge came as somewhat of a shock. He laughed . . . to him it seemed a foolish laugh, knowing how many leering devils the shadows held.

A girl's frail hand lifted him from the slough of despond; had tried to place his faltering feet on the first rung of the ladder that reaches to self-respect again. A woman had done this, just as surely as another woman had drawn him along the way to destruction. To him the East had never been a trap baited with irresistible allurements; he had taken the path merely to find forgetting. Life was a boomerang; it had recoiled on his own head and brought him back to worse than the starting-point, only with this difference: his mind and soul were prompting him to think of a good instead of a bad woman.

The chain of reasoning was both warped and illogical. Did it matter very much, so long as he reached somehow the firm ground of his promise, to try for her sake, as well as his own, to redeem himself? Perhaps she had not said "for her sake"! Did that matter very much? He had been asked to fight for a principle—the duty of man to cease from defiling the image in which God had created him.

Shocked by the realization of the depths to which he had fallen, and to the height which he felt within his power to reach, he poured water into a cracked basin and buried his face and hands and arms in the delicious coolness. The night seemed no longer hushed; the voice of the girl soothed and caressed his ears . . . he had ceased to be alone. He brushed his hair, replaced his jacket and mounted unsteadily to the flat roof. There was a glory of the moon as well as of the stars. He felt both, and raised his arms to them, stretching his gaunt frame as a giant who long has slept. At its zenith the sickle of silver blanched the white walls and threw shadows beyond the gently nodding trees. Far from the city, across the quiet of the fields where the night wind made a gentle murmuring, a dog, guarding the entrance to a Bedouin *gourbi*, barked. Then came the shrill cry of a jackal. He shivered and looked away.

Beyond the river glowed the lights of the hotel. In the wonderful clearness of the air he made out the balustraded balcony, and against it . . . black

shadows like the forms of a man and woman. His mind pictured one of them as Saada Medene; did she think of him as he was thinking of her?

It was an idle, useless thought, but tonight he was in the mood to reflect on anything that lifted him away from himself and what he had been. There was the big invisible barrier—the realization she had forced upon him of his own falling away. To keep that always in mind . . .

From the gloomy doorway of the street below a young Arab in a flowing white *ghandourah* moved leisurely among the garbage littering the cobblestones, and from the henna-stained flute at his lips streamed a cadence of sweet sound. Williams forgot the filth beneath his feet, yet marvelled that such beauty could rise from a quarter so squalid. Surely this should typify his future life:

Out of the depths a god did rise,
To tear death's veil from eyes
That long the darkness held.

He had read the lines in the original Greek in far-off Trinity days, when life for him had been a song. There came, too, a fragrant memory of home . . . of a grey-walled house, set in the midst of a slumbrous countryside; of summer days when there was more sunlight than shadow on the fields of golden corn, and a horizon faintly edged with fleecy clouds. England—far off, yet brought near by his fleeting acquaintance with an Arab girl.

From one end of the parapet he moved to the

other. The Roman and the Eastern city stretched before him, proudly majestic on its impregnable rock, scarred yet never shattered by its eighty sieges. If rock could stand so much, how vastly more the soul of a man lifted from its vileness by the ennobling influence of a woman! In the sweet coolness he threw himself down on the blanched stones, and the murmur of the distant river soothed him to the peaceful sleep of an innocent child.

CHAPTER VI

DESTINY

LANCE RAILSFORD found the Transatlantique Hotel at Constantine all that could be desired. He revelled in the choice cuisine, the bright, exhilarating company, the attention to creature comfort which was Monsieur Caret's special pride. Yet inevitably the time would come when he and Saada must tear themselves away and start for El Bouira. The method of travel promised difficulties; El Bouira lay off the regular track beyond Biskra, supplied by the Chemins de Fer Algerie and the excellent service of the Transatlantique Pullman motors. The agent of the latter company came to the rescue on hearing that transport by camel across the desert had fallen through.

"We can place both a car and a commissaire at your disposal," he said, mentioning extremely moderate fees. "You will travel *via* Batna and Biskra and complete the journey in five days."

Lance went back to Saada, delighted at this good turn of fortune's wheel.

"This gives us four more days in this delightful place," he said, as he joined her at tea on the hotel terrace. "Time enough to send to Tunis for

your father and to get him to stay with you in El Bouira until the wedding."

Saada was immensely pleased with the prospect. The time with her father in Tunis had seemed all too short, and now that Mrs. Railsford was no longer there to chaperone her, it was essential some one besides Lance should go with her on the long journey across the desert. Accordingly, she telegraphed to Tunis and received a reply saying that Sheikh Medene would join her the following day.

They were to leave on the Saturday, taking the road beyond Ain Yagout, where Lance very much wanted to see the remarkable Medrassen monument supposed to be the tomb of a famous Numidian king, to Batna, the ancient rampart city of the Third Augustan Legion, where the wonderful Roman ruins of Lambaesis still stand, and so through the beautiful mountain and valley scenery of Oued-Ksour to the oasis of El Kantara. The great plain of El Outaya beyond would bring them round the corner of the last range of craggy heights to Biskra, the Queen of the Desert.

To Saada the journey appealed immensely—a return to the scenes of her happy girlhood's years. But before she left she wanted very much to see Williams again.

Lance himself—possibly to make recompense for his unreasonable outburst—had expressed a desire to go with her to thank Williams for his gallantry. Saada no longer felt afraid as they

plunged into the network of cream-walled streets heavy with the odours bred by every Eastern town. Her terror had been confined to the small curtained room in which Halek, son of Hadji Ahmed, had dared to make love to her.

Memories which had haunted her since that night flooded back as they probed further into the labyrinthine ways which Williams had made his home. Was it only the fickleness of a woman's love that had brought him there, away from the world of decent men, to the vicious haunts of the Orient? She shuddered at the sight of impudent painted faces, leering at them from cool recesses made attractive with coloured hangings and tubs of flowering plants. There were other places less alluring, where vice in its naked reality was flaunted without shame. Yet through it all her tender womanliness felt more than pity for this man sunk beyond the ken of his own people.

She hung a little more closely on Lance's arm and turned a questioning face to his.

"I've been wondering, dear, if it would be possible for you to find something for Mr. Williams to do. I'm sure, if only he could get away from all this, he would be glad of any chance to stand on his feet again."

Railsford shook his head doubtfully.

"My dear, it isn't that I won't help the poor chap. You'll find when you get to the heart of the matter he won't let you help him. The last thing those poor devils ever dream of is work. By the

time a fellow's doped the best years of his life away he doesn't possess enough backbone to sell matches. Now where are we?"

Saada had stopped to take her bearings by the tall square tower of the mosque of Djama Salak Bey.

"That is the house—over there. I know it by the small square window in the top storey."

Lance nodded and went briskly forward to the entrance—a recessed door studded with copper-headed nails beneath a horseshoe arch of carved stone. It opened into a tiny *patio* with a balcony supported by marble columns with Corinthian capitals—Arab loot brought from a Roman city in the plains. A wizened little woman in a threadbare *mahalfa*, spotlessly clean, rose from the dish of *cous-cous* which she was tending at a brazier, and turned her face to the wall at sight of the unbelievers.

Saada stilled her fears by saluting her in her own tongue, and the wrinkled features expanded in a glad smile that one so beautiful and richly dressed should have honoured her humble abode with her presence.

"The blessing of Allah be upon thee and thine for ever!" she mumbled, touching her forehead with her hand and then kissing her finger-tips. "May riches come to thee to the end of thy days, and Mahomet the Camel Driver, the friend of the poor, guide thee from the uprising to the going down of the sun."

"Great joy also to thee, O true follower of the Prophet!" replied Saada. "It is an honoured privilege that we may enter thy house."

Extravagant compliments having thus been exchanged, the woman drove the young kid and the fowls from the combined living and bedroom, and intimating that she was about to partake of her evening meal, began to spread mats for them on the floor.

Saada, however, got over the obligation by producing a small wad of five-franc notes which she pressed into the skinny palm. Then she said,

"We wish to see the *roumi* who lives at the top of the house. Will you give us permission to go up?"

The old woman shook her head.

"You have come too late. The Englishman you seek has gone away. I am sad and afflicted, because he has been to me, so despised of men, almost as a son. For the third time at the Feast of Rhamadan has he honoured me with his presence; even as a son, according to the word of the Prophet, honoureth his own mother. But two nights since he shook from his feet the dust of my dwelling, and Ramela will see him no more."

Saada kept back the sigh that rose involuntarily to her lips.

"Do you know where he has gone?"

The other shook her head.

"Neither where he has gone nor why he went away. He appeared in great trouble, sick both in

mind and body. Because the hands of a woman had touched his eyes, he was afflicted with great misery."

Saada knew that Ramela was referring to her.

"You know, O daughter," she went on, "that for many moons this unhappy Infidel had tempted the wrath of Allah the Great One by taking that which is forbidden both by the Mahomedan and the Christian law."

"I know he took *haschish*," the girl admitted unhappily, "but he promised never to touch it again."

The old woman looked wise.

"Does not the Koran say, O pretty one, that to please a woman a man will lie to his god? Even so has the *roumi* done to you. But stay: I am unmindful of my word to him who was like a son. Is this your name?" and in the thin film of sand that lay upon the courtyard flags at the entrance to her dwelling, she traced with her finger in Arabic characters the name of Saada Medene.

"I am Saada Medene," replied the girl. "Why do you ask?"

The woman made no reply, but moved to the high wooden bed with its corner-posts of red and gold wood and its silken canopy surmounted by a bevelled mirror beneath a flaming crescent. The claw-like hands groped beneath the canopy, and from the folds of gauze-like material she took an envelope and on it was inscribed in a neat, firm hand Saada's name.

"He said that one day you would come," the old woman muttered. "I was to give you this . . . and when your eyes have read it the heart that is in you will understand."

Railsford apparently took no interest in the conversation. Having taken stock of the Arab woman's room, he had found, in a cupboard-like place without, the gaudily painted sepulchre of a marabout or holy man, a fantastically crude arrangement resembling an old-fashioned cradle suspended between wooden supports. Evidently the aged woman thought highly of the guest who honoured her house with his dead presence, for she had covered the coffin with a silk cloth embroidered in gold thread with verses from the Koran.

"Don't bother any more about that fellow," Lance called good-naturedly. "Come and look at the last resting-place of a marabout. I don't suppose you've ever seen such a thing before."

And then he checked himself abruptly, remembering with a shock that Saada herself was of the same race and blood as this revered son of Islam who had found his last resting-place among the goats and fowls in a backyard of Constantine. Of late he had been prone to lose sight of Saada's nationality; it had not struck him nearly as forcibly as when they were in England, probably because there it was a very uncommon thing to meet Eastern people.

Apparently she had not caught his last remark.

She came towards him, looking troubled, with John Williams' letter in her hand.

"We shall never see him again. We've come too late," she said gravely.

Railsford's glance went to the sheet of common paper, and he read,

"MY DEAR MISS MEDENE,

"When you get this—I shall have gone. I tried to continue the struggle but found it too much for me. Something tells me that you will try to see me again—to test for yourself the sincerity of my promise. Having failed, I find myself without the courage to face you.

"For your big unselfish effort to save me I thank you most gratefully. Fate has been too strong: the help I needed came just a little too late. Try to think of me still with some compassion; I shall treasure the thought to the journey's end.

"Very sincerely yours,
"JOHN WILLIAMS."

"Well, that settles it. My prophecy is justified," exclaimed Lance, refolding the letter and handing it back. "You can't help such people, because they won't make an effort to help themselves. Tell the old lady if ever the poor chap should show up again, we looked in to thank him for all he did on your behalf; and if at any time money will help . . ."

Saada turned away, her heart too heavy to say more. She could not tell why Williams' failure hurt her so deeply—unless, of course, it was be-

cause she owed her life to him. Under the present stress of emotion she had no desire to analyse her feelings. She left a gift of money on the Arab bed and passed out into the busy life of the native quarter.

Straight-limbed, dark-skinned men and fat women devoid of the veiling *adjar* slithered along in heelless shoes; not a few turned their faces to the wall as the accursed Christian defiled the air with his presence. A water-carrier, in filthy rags, jostled Saada's shoulder with his bulging skins, and a pock-marked man riding his overburdened ass edged her into the garbage of the gutter. These were her people . . . and Williams had fallen lower than they.

The blazing sun beat fiercely down and drew a haze of mistiness over her eyes; the pulsing heat and riot of movement, colour, and sound were blotted out; she was alone once more in a bare-walled room, clasping the hand of the man who had saved her life.

She picked her way blindly at Lance's side through the flocks of sheep and goats with which the street was congested. A little crowd gaped open-mouthed at a wandering story-teller in a scarlet turban and blue *bernows*. Coins were falling into his grimy palm. At the entrance to a café black-faced men from the South were beating on skin drums, and scantily-dressed, sensuous-limbed girls were twisting their shining bodies into the most amazing contortions. Yesterday

Williams had belonged to this life—had formed part of it; now . . .

She shut out the picture and was glad when they struck into the clean sunshine of the Place de Nemours. Somehow she was beginning to hate and dread the East to which she belonged. It was easy now to understand Helen Railsford's secret antipathy. She stole a sidelong, unquiet glance at Lance's good-looking face. It was set in contemptuous lines, the silent disapproval of all that he had witnessed. Saada felt afraid lest the happiness she had hoped to give him should prove as great a chimera as her faith in John Williams had turned out to be.

CHAPTER VII

SHEIKH MEDENE

IT was late, and Constantine gleamed and scintillated like a jewelled crown against the purple canopy of the night sky, when the slow-moving train rumbled over the El Kantara bridge and drew into the dimly-lit station.

Saada had driven down in the hotel motor to welcome her father. As the faintly-illumined carriages, packed for the most part with standing Arabs and perspiring soldiers destined for the Casbah, perched like an eagle's eerie on the high point south of the town, flitted past, she caught a glimpse of a round, good-natured face beaming at her through horn-rimmed spectacles, and waved her small hand to Yakoub, son of Abd-el-Hak, her father's confidential servant and odd man.

She had known and loved Yakoub—who delighted more than anything else in his self-styled English title of Yors Truley—ever since she was quite a small child. Sixteen years before, Sheikh Medene, then a prosperous Arab, had bought the man from a Bedouin caravan-owner who had treated him cruelly, and on asking his name Yakoub had replied, with his fingers pressed to his

forehead, "Yors Truley, my lord," and Yors Truley he had remained ever since.

He lowered the window and let down an immense armful of luggage. Then with much puffing and blowing he waddled to the platform and bowed low before his young mistress, his baggy *seroul* causing him to look quite as broad as he was tall.

"With rev'rince and much pleasureness, Yors Truley, a wretched but fortunit child of the Prohpet, salutes the daughter of Sheikh Medene his master and a Great One of the Earth, yiss," he said in a sing-song voice. "May Allah smile kindly upon her—and bring some one more worthy than this worm to move the bagg-ages."

Saada laughed and extended her hand, which Yakoub kissed.

"The man will see to the baggage, Yakoub. Please take me to my father," she said.

But already Sheikh Medene, a frail little man in a green turban and a white silken *bernous*, on which gleamed a number of French and Tunisian orders, was coming towards them. His faded, kindly eyes lit warmly at sight of the young girl, who kissed him first on each cheek and then on the forehead, and in return he took her bare arm and reverently raised it to his lips.

"Indeed, this is the great hour of my life, to see thee once again, my dearest jewel," he said, holding her a little way from him and regarding

her affectionately. "Your telegram came as a most pleasant surprise."

Out of deference to her he generally addressed her in English.

Saada led him to the waiting car.

"In a way, father, Mrs. Railsford's leaving was fortunate. I couldn't stay at El Bouira alone with Lance, so he kindly suggested you should be with me until the wedding."

The old man gravely inclined his head.

"That was a most kind thought. I reverence him for thinking of an old man. Now tell me —you are quite happy?"

They were drawing down the long road to the town, with Yakoub sitting up very straight behind them, his arms folded after the manner of the servants who attend his Excellency the Governor when he drives through the streets of Tunis.

"Oh, quite!" the girl answered, after a short pause. "Lance is very good to me, and I'm sure we shall have a happy married life. But, father," glancing up into the once-handsome face on which age had set its seal in deep lines, "you are not looking so well as when I left you in Tunis."

The kindly almond-shaped eyes took on a shadow of sadness, the gentle mouth quivered.

"Allah the All-Wise and All-Powerful has decreed that these unworthy shoulders of mine shall still be heavily burdened," he answered slowly. "It is the price one pays in old age for the sins

of youth. Through suffering alone the heart of man learns wisdom. Let that pass, light of my eyes; the French Government bears heavily upon me for taxes. Ever I am becoming a poorer man."

She looked away, troubled.

"I only wish it were in my power to help. But as the wife of a comparatively poor man I shall be able to do but little to repay all your goodness to me."

"Dear child"—the frail hand closed over hers—"I look for only one reward—to see you happy. My own trials are but the visitations from the Most High. Could I but know that always a smile will light on your face——"

"Dear, I have found happiness. My husband will be everything to me, even as I shall strive to be all in all to him."

"But your husband's mother, of the shrewd eyes and double-edged tongue . . . does she wish you well?"

The colour drained swiftly from Saada's cheeks.

"Oh, I think so, father. Generally she is very kind; though sometimes I imagine . . ." Her voice was lost in the throaty roar of the car as it toiled the rise.

"Well, what do you imagine?" asked the sheikh insistently. The tired eyes had become in an instant pin-pricks of flame.

"Perhaps it is hardly fair to say so, when she is not here," the girl went on. "But I have

thought that she resents . . . her son marrying a woman of another race."

"So! So! I had feared it!" sinking back against the cushions. "The natural prejudice of the West against all that is Eastern. Perhaps it is inevitable; they are different peoples. Has she said aught to you?"

To no one else in the world could Saada have made the confession.

"Not to me, dear; but I fancy more than once she has raised objections with Lance. I myself went over all the ground, put every obstacle in his way—when he first proposed to me. I do realize that there are vast differences between the English and the Arabs; I realize that, more and more each day, now that I am back again in the land of my own people."

A sigh drifted from him. He averted his glance and appeared to be watching the hurrying night-life of the town.

Then, very gravely, he asked,

"Do you feel—very much—that these . . . are your own people?"

Her head rose suddenly; she shot him a surprised glance.

"Why, what a strange question to ask! Of course, when I see the clear sky, the burning sun, the colour and picturesqueness everywhere, I know that I am back again in the land where I was born."

"But the people—the people?" he repeated.

The slender shapely shoulders rose and fell. The expression on the sensitive mouth presaged a disavowal.

"I—I must confess I am disappointed," she said gravely. "To me they appear indolent and dirty, with no desire in life but to sleep the hours away. The girls seem to live only for love-making and fine clothes; the men drink and smoke and gamble from sunrise to sunset. . . . Mind you, father, I'm speaking only of what I've seen."

He looked troubled.

"I fear it is all only too true. Except for the better classes, there is little real work done. And does not the Koran rightly say, 'The hand that goes not willingly to labour takes full toll of soul-destroying pleasure?' This is the curse which has fallen on our land since the *rhoumis* came and took possession. We see their follies and strive to imitate them; strong wine, forbidden by the Prophet, becomes our drink, and eyes that once were famed through all the world for brilliance now grow dim through this accursed thing. . . . But we come back to the mother of your future husband."

"She has returned to England to be at the bedside of a dying relative."

"True, true. But I am thinking—is it possible her son is sharing in secret the view she holds?"

Saada shook her small head.

"I am certain he does not. Lance made his

choice of his own free will after every objection I could put forward had been raised. Once only has he referred to his mother's attitude. . . .”

“So—the seed is already there?”

She smiled confidently.

“I offered to release him. He will not let me go.”

“But in England—when you return?”

“In England,” she replied honestly, “I was made to feel my position. People who knew of my Arab blood looked down on me. Their doors were shut in my face. For this reason alone I was glad to return to Tunis.”

“One day you will go back?”

Her lips trembled.

“I suppose I shall. Everything depends on Lance's work. He might be posted to the Foreign Office again. In that case——”

“You will be at an unfair disadvantage.”

“Why unfair?” she asked quickly.

Sheikh Medene stroked his white beard.

“I ought not perhaps to have said that. The responsibility is your husband's. If he loves you for yourself——”

“I'm sure he does. The difference in blood will not count with him. Mrs. Railsford's objections—such as they were—he overruled: Ah, here we are at the hotel; you must be very tired.”

The sheikh rose heavily on a gold-mounted cane.

“We will talk further of this another time—

before your wedding-day," he said enigmatically. "Allah has been good to give me this chance of seeing you before you go to your husband."

Railsford was standing in the vestibule beyond the short flight of steps leading to the hotel terrace when the car bringing Saada, Sheikh Medene, and his servant drew into the circle of radiance cast by the overhead lights.

A number of young fellows—two from the English bank, one from the British Engineering Company of North Africa, and one attached to the Foreign Office Intelligence Department—had strolled up from the town to smoke and chat an idle hour away before dinner.

The hum of conversation between them ceased as Yakoub, pompously self-important in his master's interests, waved imperiously to the little group of servants clustered on the steps.

"Now, fellahs—yoh ; mak' way dah for one ob the great wans ob dis earth, indeed. Get you some carpet for set down ; dis gravel am wet, and the Sheikh ob Medene, inshallah, will mek de Pilgrimage agen, and say Fatihaho only for dem that reckernize him greatness. This is the word ob Yors Truley, humble servant to his mos' illustr'ous master. Tek that luggidge, bye."

Yakoub jumped down amid a general flurry of excitement and drove the hotel servants like sheep before him to do his master's bidding. In his eyes, Sheikh Medene was of more importance than the

Bey of Tunis, and just as important, to Yakoub, was this unique opportunity to air his incomparable English.

Purkiss, of the Crédit Foncier d'Algérie, turned to the aristocratic-looking man beside him and wrinkled his brows.

“Good Lord, Barville, what sort of circus is it—a page out of the Arabian Nights Entertainment or a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera? The old gentleman looks as though he might have stepped out of ancient Baghdad; the fat bespectacled boy from the stage door of the Savoy . . . and the girl . . . my God! she’s pretty! Who is she?”

Railsford, moving towards the entrance, caught only the end of Purkiss’ remark. He was in time to hear Barville’s reply,

“The lady must be Miss Medene, Railsford’s fiancée. The sheikh, I believe, is her father; isn’t that so, Railsford?”

Lance reddened. He had been careful to keep Saada’s nationality a profound secret. Yet somehow an inkling of the truth had leaked out. Before he could put in a word the middle-aged man on the edge of the group had taken Barville up.

“Nonsense, Sir Louis,” he said in a guarded manner. “That girl belongs to Constantine. I’ve seen her myself in the native quarter. It’s hardly the thing, you know, to suggest Railsford is engaged to a lady of colour.”

Lance could no longer remain silent. As the

sheikh came forward, leaning on Saada's arm, he turned to his friends.

"I'm afraid you fellows must excuse me. Miss Medene has been to the station to meet her father. He is very old, and must be tired after the long journey. Perhaps you will come along to dine before we go. What about Friday—say at half-past seven?"

Saada had been halted in the midst of a barricade of luggage and was issuing orders to Yakoub.

Barville eyed her frigidly through his monocle.

"Sorry, Railsford, but I've promised to feed young Rivington at the club on Friday."

"And I am leaving for Algiers by the morning train," interjected Purkiss, lying easily.

The others excused themselves with equal clumsiness. For the first time since his arrival in North Africa Railsford experienced a sense of shame. He had always half feared the fact of his being engaged to a native girl would bring about social ostracism, yet, now that he was faced with the fact, the prospect alarmed him.

He bade his friends good-night, and turned away, making no endeavour to introduce them to Saada.

Purkiss looked back and grinned over his shoulder as Sheikh Medene greeted his future son-in-law in truly Eastern fashion by kissing him on each cheek.

"Shade of Hermes, but some fellows do ask for trouble!" he muttered, falling in at Barville's side. "I can understand his falling in love with the girl

—no man with blood in his veins could help it . . . but as to marrying her—ugh!”

“And to take on the family!” Sir Louis stared blankly at his companion. “Would you dream any fellow could be such an unutterable fool? And I believe, too, he’s got something of a position out here.”

“Not such a position as he’ll have when his uncle dies.” Purkiss was official news-gatherer to the little English colony in Constantine. “Thorburn, of the Lyonnais, who was up with him at Cambridge, told me only yesterday that when the old man pegs out, Railsford comes into nearly half a million, and one of the finest seats in the home counties.”

“And yet,” scoffed Barville, pausing to light a cigarette, “he ignores the hundreds of nice English girls and commits the unpardonable sin of touching the colour streak.”

Purkiss looked serious.

“I feel more sorry for the girl than for him. At least he goes into the business open-eyed; she doesn’t dream what’s in store for her. Where are they bound for—after the marriage, I mean?”

Carew Hopson, who had hitherto kept silence, broke in on the discussion.

“To El Bouira, of all places. He’s going to be the new Vice-Consul there . . . and of course, so far as the English-speaking community is concerned, it’s about as select as it can be. General Bravington’s wife queens it; you can imagine the

sort of reception an Arab girl married to an Englishman will get."

Barville shook his head.

"It's a mistake, a colossal mistake. I never yet knew a case to turn out satisfactorily—especially when the man is in a public position. Either he has to hide the woman away or clear out himself. In this case . . . I shouldn't blame him for sticking to the girl. She is very beautiful."

Purkiss laughed.

"I'm afraid Railsford's not built that way. He's lost his head—and senses—to a pretty face and fine figure. When the edge of passion wears off he'll make some excuse to get out of his bad bargain . . . pension the old man to take the daughter back with him to Tunis, or wherever he comes from."

"For myself," interrupted Hopson, as they struck down the high-walled road towards the town, "I should say the girl's half English—the product of a mixed marriage, an Arab father and a white mother."

"You can't tell," said Purkiss dogmatically. "Because she lacks the slightly slanting eyes and the semitic nose of the true Arab is no criterion. I've seen natives in the Kroumerie—in Ain Dra-ham, to be precise—as fair as ever came out of Devonshire. Descendants of the Romans, no doubt; and at every fourth or fifth generation the Western blood comes to the top."

Barville was thinking of sweet-faced Saada.

"Anyway, it seems jolly rough on the girl; that's all I can say."

And there the discussion ended.

Railsford, however, was almost as intimately conscious as though he had been present. He had caught the changed expressions of their faces, the sudden frigidity of manner, scented the lameness of the excuses why they should not meet again. The thought haunted him for the rest of that night; made him more susceptible than he otherwise might have been to the surprised looks directed at them over dinner by the other guests. The raised brows, the interchange of glances, the hush which fell upon the diners when Saada, followed by the sheikh in his flowing white robes and rich turban, took their places at the table, told him more plainly than any words that the sending for the old Arab had been an act of colossal indiscretion.

He could not find it in his heart to blame Saada; he put the burden, subconsciously and unreasonably, on his mother, who had led him into such an *impasse*.

Through the long formal meal—Monsieur the proprietor had taken great pains to get prepared a special *cous-cous* in honour of his distinguished visitor—Lance ate and drank hardly anything. Instead he relapsed into a moody silence unaffected by the unusual animation Saada displayed. It was plain to see how happy she was at the opportunity of reunion with her father. Six long lonely years had drifted since the sheikh, then a man of

considerable substance, had sent her to Europe to be educated. And when her school days were over and Saada had intended to return to her beloved sunny Tunis, the blow of financial ruin had fallen to keep her in England.

By shrewd design rather than inadvertently Mrs. Railsford herself had so arranged matters that their stay in Tunis was short. Powerless to dissuade Lance from his purpose to marry Saada, at least she could so plan their journey from the coast to El Bouira that there was little opportunity to associate with the Arab family into which her son was marrying. Now all these skilfully-laid plans had been rendered void by Uncle Hugh, in his dotage, sending post-haste for the sister whom he detested.

Altogether not a happy chain of thought, for a young man of Railsford's temperament, considerably susceptible to circumstance and environment, to indulge in. To make matters worse, he showed no desire to hide his feelings. To Sheikh Medene—a pattern of cultured old-world courtesy—he was stand-offish and guardedly supercilious. He seldom interjected a remark unless directly addressed, and then only in monosyllables.

At first Saada failed to notice his change of manner, but as the time to leave Constantine drew on it became more plain that Lance was already regretting the step he had taken in suggesting the sheikh should join them. Not having fully counted the cost in loss of prestige among his own people, the price was making its weight felt.

That afternoon, through the courtesy of M. Momy, the Transatlantique's resident agent, who had taken unending pains to make their stay in Constantine enjoyable, and, in fact, had gratuitously placed at their disposal a car to visit all the sights in the city and neighbourhood, they had driven to the Palace of the Bey el Hadj-Ahmed, a wonderful example of Arab architecture enclosing four beautiful gardens surrounded by handsome pillared galleries. The sheikh had much admired the wonderful show of orange and citron trees, and the party were turning away when a message came from the resident French general who occupied the gorgeous upper rooms of the Bey's pavilion requesting that Saada and her father, whom he had known years before in Tunis, should be presented to him.

To this Lance took exception, and did not even try to hide his ill-feeling. He had no wish to be received by the general in company with an Arab, even though the Arab might be a sheikh and person of high degree; he made an excuse to sheer off, and Saada and her father went in alone.

The ebullition of ill-feeling was purely temporary, by the time the hotel was reached Lance had put it almost out of remembrance. Saada, however, felt the slight deeply, but said nothing until a late hour brought her and her lover to their customary good-night stroll on the hotel terrace.

Beyond the gravelled drive stretched rising grass land where immense blocks of grey granite, half-buried, told the romantic story of a once-

proud Roman occupation—possibly a temple to Venus or Celeste, judging from the exquisite carving of the stones.

On the broken capital of one of these immense columns Lance had seated himself and was idly watching the play of light on the turbulent water rushing through the ravine below. He felt instinctively that Saada had waited for this hour, when they should be alone, to speak of things she could not mention in the presence of her father. He had a vague, semi-repentant consciousness of guilt, of having fallen away from those ideals of chivalry and unselfishness which Saada always associated with him. Secretly he felt mean: conscious of having made a bargain which in some respects had not quite fulfilled expectations, and because the results had been somewhat different from anticipation, he had allowed her clearly to see his dissatisfaction.

Saada was frankly honest. She came directly to the point. Kneeling on the warm earth beside him and resting her hands on his knees, she met him with steady, unflinching gaze.

“Lance, I want you to reconsider your decision about marrying me,” she said very quietly, fighting back the emotion under which she laboured. “I know all you have been feeling and suffering these last few days, and——”

“You know what?” he asked, suddenly fearful of his own happiness.

Her small head tilted farther back; he watched

the rippling quiver of the tiny muscles about her throat. In the soft luminance of the stars her teeth were dazzlingly white, her eyes beautiful, despite their shadowed sadness.

“I know that things have happened to make you wish you had never engaged yourself to me. I know that the coming of my father to Constantine, the closer association of Eastern with your Western ideas, have made you half regret the step you have taken.”

He leant forward, and placing his hands beneath her arms, held her supple body fast.

“You think I have ceased to care for you, dearest?” he whispered, carried away by the lure of her beauty. The mouth that was willing to submit to his impassioned kiss grew suddenly firm. She drew a little away from him, and her voice was strong with resolution.

“I don’t think you have ceased to care, Lance, but I do want you, for your own sake, to let me go.”

Railsford had not dreamed it would come to this. He had satisfied his own meanness of soul up to the safety-point of immunity from consequence; now, faced with the loss of Saada, he felt suddenly afraid.

For a moment he made no answer to her unexpected request: his tongue passed over his dry lips; he drew a long deep breath of surprise. Then, regaining his self-possession, he said,

“You really don’t expect me to take you seriously,

dear . . . unless, of course, you no longer care for me."

It was a coward's way, to throw the blame on her, and his voice failed over the last words. Saada merely regarded him with a look of tender compassion.

"When you asked me—how much I cared . . . I told you without any reserve, Lance. I had never known what it was to love a man—except my own father—until I met you in London. Then . . . well, you know how it happened; we just seemed to grow fond of each other, and when you asked me to marry you . . . I—I—was very happy . . . because I thought—you would be happy, too."

"Well, and have you since lost faith in me?"

"Perhaps I have lost faith in myself. I wanted to feel that in me you had found all you could need in this life; some one to fill every hour with happiness."

He knew that she was taking the major burden on her own small shoulders. Still he remained selfishly obdurate.

"You don't believe you can make me happy?" he asked.

"Not unless your love is deeper, stronger than it is now, Lance"—raising her troubled face to his. "I don't want to hurt you, but I am anxious to save you from a step you might afterwards regret."

"Why should I regret?" he asked, almost roughly.

“What sort of a man should I be—to regret having married you?”

“You are beginning to realize . . . the truth of what I told you that afternoon—in the Cotswolds. Blood will tell. There is a difference; the East and the West are so far divided that nothing but perfect love can bridge them. I believed you to be in earnest about our engagement: perhaps you are still . . . but I am more than afraid—for your sake.”

In an instant he had clasped her shoulders, and bending, kissed her.

“Of course I love you,” he said impatiently, as though hurt and surprised that she had ever doubted him. “I have always loved you . . . ever since I first saw you in London. I wanted you then . . . made up my mind to win you . . . and now—now you are talking about breaking off the engagement.”

“Only, sweetheart, because things seem so different,” she remonstrated gently. “We are getting very near to our wedding-day. Sometimes I have fancied a change has come over you; that you have felt you would be standing in your own light if you married an Arab girl. I know how you have felt about my father. His being with us sets the stamp of race upon me.” The poise of her head told him more plainly even than her words the pride she took in her father. “I am not ashamed. Can you say the same?”

"You quite misjudge me," he said, looking hurt, "because I do not understand Eastern people and Eastern ways as you do. I respect the sheikh, and honour him immensely. You mustn't blame me, darling, if I haven't as much affection for him as you have."

"The last thought in my mind is to blame you for anything," she replied. "I shouldn't blame you if you said now, 'Our engagement is a mistake; I want to break it.' I should admire you—for being strong."

His long fingers smoothed the softness of her hair.

"You are very foolish tonight, little sweetheart . . . filled with strange fears. I have never at any time wanted to let you go: least of all now, with our wedding-day so near. Every hour you grow more precious, more necessary to my happiness. I couldn't ever—ever let you go."

In the shelter of his arms she ceased to feel afraid. Her warm body moved yieldingly to his; she hid her face against his shoulder and he felt the softness of her breast. Then, with a gesture of thankfulness, she lifted her head, brushed the tears from her cheek and raised her lips.

Railsford thrilled at the touch of her childish mouth. In his nostrils was the subtle perfume of her flesh, her hair. He held her fast, his breath coming quickly . . . and in turn kissed her on the lips and the brow.

"Saada, I am in heaven with you," he murmured passionately.

"Have I been very cruel, Lance?" she asked, still nestling close.

"Not cruel," he said, smoothing the troubled lines from her forehead. "Only a little unjust. You made me feel as though I had done you an injury."

"And all the time—you weren't really—dissatisfied with your bargain?"

"Of course not"—laughing boyishly. "How could I be? You mustn't worry your dear head because I haven't quite accustomed myself to your father's Eastern ways."

She slid her hand trustingly into his.

"And you will never regret, Lance? I would rather you said so now . . . before it is too late."

"Darling"—gently releasing her—"I have told you. I shall never regret . . . never."

CHAPTER VIII

A HERITAGE OF BLOOD

AS they stood together on the terrace the following morning, Lance with her father and Yakoub, grouped about the magnificent car which was to take them to the desert, far to the south, Saada felt almost ashamed of her overnight fears.

Lance positively radiated enthusiasm as he looked over the motor with the stalwart driver whom the Transatlantique had supplied.

“The machine is simply wonderful,” he said, rejoining the girl on the hotel steps. She’ll run like quicksilver on a thousand-mile sheet of glass. The body can be covered in if we get rain in the mountains; there’s ample room for all the luggage. It’s another amazing example of road transport beating the railways every time.”

“And in Africa, too,” Saada’s dark eyes sparkled. “That’s what fascinates me, Lance—to know we can go from one corner of this marvellous country to another, visit Roman ruins and long-lost cities, without once having to consult a time-table.”

François van Ecken, the Belgian chauffeur, six-feet two in his shoes and strong as a lion, touched his peaked cap politely.

“Mademoiselle will see all the wonders of Algeria for the first time. *Parbleu!*—they are *très magnifique* . . . the *montagnes*, the Kabyle country, the hot springs—*pouf!*—those Romans knew somedink. And my car—ah! she is *très bon, très bon*. You see.”

She laughed as she watched him purr over the beautiful engine, the spotless bodywork, the roomy interior, and felt that this break in a somewhat strained situation had come just at the right time. Lance had apparently quite forgotten—if ever he had really nurtured—his aversion to his Arab companions, for he laughed and chattered with Yors Truley and the sheikh as though they had been lifelong friends.

Altogether Saada felt more happy than she had done for a long time past. It meant so much to her, to know that Lance was trying to overcome the prejudice which most white men have for people of another race. The keynote to success in their married life lay in this vital surrender. Saada’s love for her parent formed so great a part of her existence, that hostility or contempt—whether veiled or otherwise—on Lance’s side must have made a successful marriage utterly impossible.

Monsieur Momy, who had so ungrudgingly acted as their cicerone during their pleasant sojourn in Constantine, came to see them off, and handed to Lance personal introductions to the company’s agents at Batna and Biskra.

“Whatever you wish done they will attend to;

anything you or your friends desire to see you have only to mention it to them."

Lance expressed his gratitude and warmly shook Momy's hand.

"It is a wonderful way of doing business," he said. "In all my travels I have never seen anything to equal it."

Monsieur bowed at the compliment.

"We aim at a general freemasonry among all who use our service, Monsieur Railsford. We like you to feel that in every one of the company's servants you have a personal friend. *Bon voyage!*"

Monsieur and Madame Caret, the latter with an armful of poppies nestled against her bosom, waved them farewell; the big motor purred down the white, dusty road and bore them swiftly through miles of pretty country towards the mountains.

Saada sank back, her arm linked through her sweetheart's and her small hand slid affectionately into his. It seemed that at last the realization of her fondest dreams was coming true. All through the long lonely years in England, where her heritage of blood had so cruelly isolated her behind a barrier of prejudice and scorn, she had turned her thoughts to the hour when once again fate should lead her steps to the sun-kissed, flower-garlanded land of her birth.

As the car sped on, devouring the miles of blanched roads bordered by fields, where the wild flowers grew in such a riot of abundance that Nat-

ure seemed to have splashed all the world with vivid colour, her mind was full of these things . . . a warp and woof of grateful remembrances and sad regrets. Bitterness found but little soil in her loving nature; she wanted to forgive and forget those who had made her unhappy: Mrs. Railsford, perhaps, who had been her bitterest secret enemy—Saada tried hard to attribute it to mother-love for her son. There was only one other sadness, and that did not belong to England—the remembrance of John Williams and his unavailing endeavour to free himself from the toils. How she would have rejoiced to the full measure of her big generous heart had he but sustained a little longer the effort to win freedom. One day, perhaps, she would hear of him again. . . .

“Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?” Lance broke in on her reflections, pointing to the edging of *petite bleu* which for miles bordered the track like a ribbon of purple velvet against a bar of silver. On either side were vast stretches of tawny red marigolds, flaming poppies, tall moon-daisies; and here and there, sheltered from the sun burning in an unflecked sky by groves of olive, citron, and the cool foliage of dark green cypresses, were tiny farmsteads, the homes of French colonists who had left their beloved land to plant in the soil of Africa the roots of a new Colonial empire. In the wide stretches that lay between these brave little outposts of civilization were the tents and *gourbis* of wandering Bedouins and olive-skinned

Kabyles who had immigrated from their mountain fastnesses in the West. But, more wonderful still—the relics of the greater civilization that the ages had failed to sweep away—the bridges, roads, aqueducts and mighty buildings left by the hands of Imperial Rome. Here they stood, shorn of but little of their former grandeur, magnificent temples, mighty cisterns, deserted amphitheatres and triumphal arches which long ago had echoed to the steps of men famous in the history of the world.

Lance was boyishly enthusiastic. Here, indeed, was recompense for the long period of seemingly profitless work done in London. The lure of the sunshine, the ever-present fragrance of flowers, the caress of the soft winds were a perfect setting to the adventure upon which he had embarked.

It was early evening when they reached Batna, a clean, well-built garrison town, whose chief claim to consideration, so far as the hot and dusty travellers were concerned, lay in the superb hotel accommodation awaiting them. They bathed and changed and sat down to dinner prepared by a chef who had learned his skill at the Carlton.

The sun was still glowing grandly in the west by the time they had finished coffee in the beautiful shady gardens. Lance was chatting with Sheikh Medene and Yakoub when François van Ecken approached.

The four drew to where Saada was sitting.

"The chauffeur has just made an excellent sug-

gestion," Railsford announced. "We may as well crowd every hour while we can. What do you say to a glimpse of the cedar forest of Mount Tourgourt? We get some magnificent views from the slopes, besides a sight of very interesting Kabyle villages."

Saada was delighted with the prospect and hurried to her room to fetch a coat, for after the short twilight, cool winds sweep down from the hills.

There was a short walk through the town to the place where horses can be hired. Saada waited under the palms with Yakoub and her father while Lance went off with François to arrange terms. She stopped abruptly in the act of saying something to Sheikh Medene: a tall big man was crossing the further side of the square, and as he paused and looked back across the tree-bordered space, Saada recognized him . . . John Williams, the pariah man of Constantine.

He still looked shabby, almost as poorly clad as on the fateful night when he had rescued Saada from the fury of the Arab mob, but there was this difference: the ragged clothes had been darned and brushed, the abundance of crisp dark hair was no longer tousled and matted, the face glowed clean-shaven in the sunset; his bearing was that of a man who had passed through deep and troubled waters and was striving to emerge victorious.

Saada watched him in pleased surprise. Quite unconscious of her scrutiny, he had halted in the

shade of an arch of purple bougainvillea that stretched at the entrance of a narrow turning from one side of the street to the other. Behind rose the squat octagonal tower of a mosque, balconied and canopied, the uppermost portion surmounted by a pepper-box-like structure of coloured tiles, bearing at the summit a glittering crescent.

Under the blanched walls a little group of dark-faced, lustrous-eyed children in home-made garments of green, yellow, and vermillion were eyeing longingly the stall of an itinerant seller of grapes. At sight of the big Englishman who halted to watch a procession of richly-dressed Arabs following in the wake of silk banners and flaming streamers—a wedding-party on their way to the bridegroom's house—they surged round him holding out grubby little palms and musically tinkling the gold rings in their ears as they shook their heads in a vociferous request for baksheesh.

The grey eyes turned on them a kindly smile; he said something that made them all laugh, patted the head of the smallest and gave to each in turn a small coin—the entire contents of his purse.

The sunlight dimmed Saada's eyes with suspicious moisture; a mist blotted out the procession, but she caught the glad, eager cries of the pretty children as with a toss of their coloured peaked caps they ran helter-skelter in the direction of the seller of grapes and *aubergine*. She saw the smile that lingered on the face of Williams; the last pair of saffron legs had vanished round the corner;

then, as he turned in under a shadowed archway, she addressed Yakoub.

“Yors Truley, I want you to follow the big *rhoumi* over there; find out where he lives and what he is doing in Batna.”

Yakoub’s tub-like form wriggled with pleasure at being entrusted with a mission by his young mistress. The tips of his fat fingers met in the centre of his forehead and, making a low salaam, he answered,

“Dot is already done. De act am fuss-cousin to de command, mos’ high born. Dis crawlin’ worm will follow um if necessarible to de gates ob Mecca.”

The gaudy banners floated in the wind; the drums were still thrupping and the drone of the singing processionists resembled rather a funeral than a wedding-party. Saada’s emotions were equally extreme—a feeling of deep satisfaction that Williams, in spite of a temporary lapse, looked like making good, yet tinged with a strange regret because he had passed on without seeing her.

As the bernoused and turbaned mob vanished round the corner, Railsford appeared at the head of a string of horses led by a disreputable-looking ruffian, whose attire consisted in the main of strips of sacking stitched together, with holes for arms and legs. On sighting Saada and the sheikh he explained, with profuse apologies that though poor he was scrupulously honest, and apart from the generous tips which he was sure the “duchess”

would give him, he was quite content with his lot, seeing that two pilgrimages to Mecca in his youth had assured him a hundred thousand years of pleasure with the houris in Paradise.

"Then every one's satisfied!" laughed Railford, when the whole party was mounted, and he drew alongside Saada. "But why have you sent Yors Truley back to the hotel?"

"I haven't," she replied, blushing. "While you were seeing about the horses a most extraordinary thing happened. I saw Mr. Williams."

Railford's eyes darkened.

"What! Here in Batna?"

"Yes, crossing the square—on the far side. He looked better than when I saw him in Constantine—physically, I mean—but awfully poor. I don't believe he has enough to live on."

"So you sent Yakoub to inquire?"

She could not fail to notice the sneer that lurked behind the suggestion.

"I told Yakoub to find out all he could—in case there is anything we can do for him."

Railford's mouth took on an expression of contemptuous disapproval.

"It seems to me, my dear, you're carrying this sense-of-gratitude business too far. The fellow wants neither your help nor your sympathy. He showed that plainly enough in the letter he left behind. Why not let him go his own way?"

Saada's face lit.

"I haven't forgotten—I can never forget, Lance

—that every hour of life has been given me by that man. This wonderful night . . . the sunset, the scent of the flowers, the pleasure of having you and father with me . . . I owe everything to John Williams. It wouldn't be easy or kind to try to forget."

The tall Englishman leant sideways in the saddle and eyed her searchingly.

"So all your days you are going to remember that everything good in heaven and earth comes from the hands of John Williams?"

She smiled.

"I shall never forget what he did, any more than I could forget my father's love, or your goodness to me. Lance, dear, you surely aren't jealous?"

"No, not jealous," he disclaimed irritably, flicking the ears of the mare with the fly-switch. "All the same, I do think, considering the message he left behind, you ought not to bother your head any more about him. Anyway, the subject is not over-pleasant, so we won't discuss it."

Saada said nothing, and the matter was not referred to again during the long and pleasant drive through the fragrant shadowed aisles of the cedar forest. But later, as Saada sat alone on the balcony of her room watching the mysterious flitting to and fro of the night life of the town, Yakoub knocked gently on her door and came in to report on his mission.

"You gif Yors Truley much difficultsome job," he laughed. "Dis wretched dog's body am eight

pound less in grease than whenum started. I see that man . . . tall big fellah he is . . . and he work for frowsy Arab camel-driver out there"—and he pointed far beyond the blanched walls of Batna to the fields of stubble dotted here and there with the ugly *chawias* of Bedouin and Kabyle wanderers. "Sixteen hour day dat white man work—Lord, dis pore chile ob sin sooner be French prison warder up at Lambessa. Clean camel, feed camel, drive camel from t'ree hour before the first prayer up to now. Bah! A dog's life eben for a Christian . . . and him only just get eighteen franc ebery seven day."

Saada listened, secretly thrilling with satisfaction. True, the life was fearfully hard, but what a splendid effort in face of the wasted, ruinous years!

"Where does he live?" she asked eagerly.

Yakoub pointed to the outskirts of the town, dim and mysterious under the still night sky.

"The room, li'l but very clean. Some straw and two sack. Eat *cous-cous* twice each day and a li'l drink ob sour wine. Café, absinthe, cig'rette—neber. Arab woman she tell me him good uncrooked man. Allah be praised for one good *rhoumi* in the land of no profit."

Not Allah, but God be praised was the formless prayer that rose from Saada's heart. Many times since that eventful night had she given long anxious hours thinking of Williams, hopeful that all would yet be well with him. She rejoiced in the grim struggle which he was waging, yet fretted

that bonds of convention kept her from going more practically to his aid.

That night she slept more happily than for a long time past. At last it seemed that in every direction her sorrows were coming to an end. Lance's treatment of her father had shown of late a marked improvement, much to Sheikh Medene's secret satisfaction.

She would have liked to speak to Williams before leaving Batna, but the car was ordered at an early hour when she knew he would be tending or driving his unfriendly charges across the once-fertile lands of Mauretania. They left Batna in the first flush of sunrise, taking the road once tramped by the proud legions of Rome moving inland to their military headquarters at Lambessa. It was an interesting journey through this once fertile granary that had fed the Western world. Now all that was left were the occasional cultivated tracts wrested from desolation by French colonists, the paved ways and ruined temples, the tall columns and the grand triumphal arches on the hills. At length they halted in the spacious stone-flagged streets of Timgad, the "show" city of Northern Africa.

They would have loved to spend a week among the fine buildings and dignified colonnades, the wonderful statues and exquisite carvings, but El Bouira was calling.

The land changed. Gone were the grim mountains, the rushing torrents, the fertile plains and

fragrant valleys . . . the world was given over to a blazing desert of sand, dotted at far intervals with cool oases of thousands of palms.

They made El Bouira three days behind time, being delayed by a sand-storm which for many hours buried the wide Roman trackway under several feet of fine dust. Fortunately, at the end of seventy-two hours, the burning south wind veered round to the east and brought a breath of coolness from the salt lakes; the dust lifted, and in the cool of a delicious evening they sighted, clear against the western horizon, the green fields and the tree-sheltered walls of El Bouira.

Never had Saada seen anything so beautiful as this first glimpse of the place which was to be her future home. A gem of softest emerald set in the crown of blazing gold . . . groves of citron, lemon, and orange, springing up at the fringe of the desert and providing cool shade to the very gates of El Bouira.

An immensely high wall, planted at intervals with embattled towers more picturesque than serviceable in their ruinous decay, surrounded the town, and about it frothed and seethed white clematis, purple-bougainvillea, sweet-smelling jasmine and cluster-roses. At the end of a broad, well-lighted street bordered with plane trees and palms stood a small but dignified building, the English church, raised some twenty years before by the British colony which had been working on a special concession from the French Government.

A club house, a new hotel run on first-class lines by the Transatlantique Company, a small but flourishing business section mostly occupied by French and Maltese, but with a fair sprinkling of English, completed the European portion; on three sides stretched the native quarter.

Saada's hopes ran high as she looked out upon the cool, clean streets. In the open cafés a few uniformed French and native soldiery drowsed or talked with Gallic animation; on the sanded floors sloe-eyed native youths played dominoes and paused to lend an attentive ear to a marabout dis-couraging on the teachings of the Koran.

Below the high walls which formed the backs of better-class houses ran a slowly-trickling stream clear as crystal and deliciously cool, brought from the adjacent oasis of Yene Hadar.

In the square beneath the tiled walls and twisted pillars of the Great Mosque groups of cameleers were gathered, bartering with the sellers of water, dates, and other commodities essential to the long southward journey across the Sahara. Life, form, warmth, and colour everywhere: a land of sunshine, smiles, and love.

Saada felt that she had come home at last. The face of the aged sheikh reflected the same spirit. They laughed together and clapped their hands in an ecstasy of pleasure over a score of trivial things which the phlegmatic Northener would pass unnoticed. The sight of the dancing girls of the Ouled Nail, in their black and red dresses richly

ornamented with gold plaques, the very tinkling of the heavy gold rings in their ears and about their foreheads, drew expressions of childish pleasure from Saada.

She turned to Lance, her face flushed.

“Everything comes back—the scenes of my childhood,” she said, her eyes sparkling; then nodded towards her father. “Don’t you remember—my twelfth birthday—before we came up to Tunis . . . the Ouled Nail came, and danced in the moonlight as we sat on the roof till the stars went out of the sky? Then I remember, there was a snake-charmer who came one day from Beni Azoun, a devil-man from the Soudan who did the most wonderful tricks, and, to end up, we went off on camels to the holy city of Halfouine across the plains, and saw the priests walking on white-hot stone. It was very dreadful . . . and yet I remember the next day I wanted to go and see it all over again.”

Railsford, looking gravely at her, became suddenly preoccupied. Strange thoughts were in his mind . . . an aspect that never before had occurred to him. Was it possible, after their marriage, Saada would lose her veneer of Western civilization and become again one of her own people—Arab in sentiment, religion, and feeling, as well as in flesh and blood?

CHAPTER IX

EL BOUIRA

IT was a pity such a thought should have come at the moment of reaching El Bouira. Railford had honestly tried, through the past four weeks to put away every doubt that arose as to the wisdom of his union with a coloured girl. Back in England he seldom thought of Saada as such; at times forgot it altogether, except when in the society of others a covert glance might be directed at her finger-nails, or brows raised over the Eastern character of her name. Had she herself made an effort to cloak her nationality few would ever have associated her with the Arab race; yet here, among her own people, the consciousness was suddenly borne in on him that neither her Western upbringing nor the tie of her marriage to a white man would really change her nature.

As they left the busier quarter a tremendous hush seemed to have fallen on sky and desert, bathed in an illimitable flood of amber light; in the west the sun throbbed and glowed like an immense plaque of gold, and the air was drowsy with the hum of insect life.

Saada leaned back, chatting gaily with her father; the eyes of both were glowing.

"Is it not good, O my daughter, to be back in the land which Allah in his great wisdom has so mercifully blessed?" he asked, passing one thin hand over the other and beaming with delight on the scene unfolded as the car took the straight rise leading to the hotel. "Often in Tunis I have told myself that it is neither the blue sea nor the great cities which makes Africa what she is, but the desert . . . the desert—*là*!"

He stared across a vista of sand edged in the distance with the nodding plumes of palms and the soft green of the oasis rim. Against the turquoise of the skyline slow-moving camels lumbered with measured tread, their white-draped riders, bearing long-barrelled guns across their shoulders, clear-cut as cameos in the crystal atmosphere. Sun and sand, palms and shady groves, the scent of flowers, and a pulsing heat that turned each day into a love-song and the nights into dreams of desire.

Saada turned to her lover.

"We ought to be happy here, Lance," she whispered, slipping her hand into his. "In all the world have you ever seen any spot so wondrously beautiful?"

He was forced to confess he had not, and would have caught the same spirit of enthusiasm but for the dark, troubrous thoughts lurking in the back of his mind. They were not allayed when, passing up the stone-walled drive banked by masses of wild flowers—marigolds, veteres, purple, white,

and blue, sainfoin gleaming redly, succamelle and purple borage in patches, and stately asphodels—he saw the terrace of the hotel crowded with English people who had come there, some few to drowse and idle the evening away, the majority to gain first impressions of the new arrivals.

In little groups they walked the rose-trellised verandah or sipped iced drinks at marble-topped tables in the shade of the orange trees. There was a general raising of heads and a sudden hush of meaningless chatter, as the car and the attendant luggage-carrier stopped at the entrance.

Monsieur Bertrand, the manager, followed by his son, came fussing out to offer a welcome. He assisted Saada and her father to alight, while the younger man issued orders for the disposal of the baggage. Lance was conscious of critical glances and guarded whisperings, of shrugged shoulders and smothered remarks, as with the girl on one side and the old Arab on the other, he followed Bertrand up the terrace steps.

He sensed rather than heard “new British Official” bandied from lip to lip, and knew one was telling the other that the native girl at his side was to be the future hostess at the Vice-Consulate.

Through a dead silence they passed the several groups and entered the cool of the vestibule. Said Bertrand, speaking in French,

“I trust Mademoiselle and Messieurs have made good travelling. It was expected you would arrive on Tuesday, and there have been many inquiries as

to the cause of the delay. I hope nothing serious happened."

Lance felt that in replying to Bertrand he was satisfying the curiosity of the entire English-speaking population of El Bouira.

"There was difficulty over securing camels. Your company came to the rescue with their car. We have had a wonderful journey . . . and we are all ravenous for dinner."

"For Mademoiselle and Messieurs a special menu has been prepared. Dinner will be ready in one half-hour."

"You have a good many people here," Saada remarked as she handed her motoring cloak to Yakoub.

Bertrand was rubbing his palms together.

"Ah, it is the special occasion, m'amselle. News travels fast, even across the desert. There has been much excitement about the approaching wedding—is it not? Certainly, on that day, the entire town will go on holiday."

Lance whitened a little under his tan.

"I hope to goodness it won't! I had no idea any one here knew about my engagement, let alone . . ."

Bertrand smiled blandly.

"Did not Monsieur write to the agent, Monsieur Dobée, as to a house?"

At this Railsford laughed.

"Of course. I remember now. However," with

a careless wave of his hand, "it is of no consequence. I don't suppose they'll set the streets alight."

All the same, the feeling grew on him, as they sat at table later on, that every one who was any one in El Bouira had migrated to the Transatlantique Hotel, and had gone to the unnecessary expense of ordering dinner, simply to take stock of him and his future bride. And the fact that she was a native, in the care of her Arab father, would set the tongues of El Bouira wagging faster than they had ever wagged before.

All though the meal this thought bothered him. They expected the sheikh in his flaming orange robe and green turban to eat *cous-cous* with his fingers; instead he dined like any ordinary European, and the daughter might have graced a Paris salon. There would be many intrigtings and not a little disappointment over this. Having discovered the prospective wife of the freshly-appointed Vice-Consul to be the daughter of a pure-blooded Arab, it was natural to suppose they would sit on cushions and take their food out of a common dish.

The many surprised glances suggested disappointment.

If Saada was conscious of the manner in which she and her father were being regarded she gave no sign; indeed, she was too delighted with her real home-coming to bother over what people thought or said. She had known all along—in fact, had often pleaded against herself—that such would be the

natural consequence of their union ; and again and again Lance had assured her his love was strong and big enough to stand proof against such trivialities.

They had almost reached the end of the sumptuous repast, such as Lance never realized a desert town could produce, when the large room cleared rapidly. In little knots the diners drifted out, passing their table as though unconscious of their presence.

Railsford smothered a sigh. He knew by that sign that the seal of disapproval had been set upon his choice. He glanced across at Saada, wondering if she had noticed it. Her smiling face, as she exchanged a joke with her father, set his fears at rest.

“Shall we go to the music-room or into the gardens?” he questioned.

She rose from the table.

“I think father would like to go to his room. He is very tired with the long journey, dear. The music-room will be full. I’d rather sit with you under the trees while you enjoy your cigar.”

Lance nodded and they passed out. The music-room was empty: so were the vestibule and the terrace. The throng had vanished as at the touch of a magician’s wand.

“We appear to have the place to ourselves. That is ever so much nicer,” Saada said with a gaiety suddenly assumed. “It’s much better to be alone.”

“I suppose the majority have appointments in

town," he said, grasping at the first clumsy excuse. "You know what happens in these small places right off the map. Everybody visits everybody else and plays bridge or billiards almost till daylight. I quite agree; it is good to have the place to ourselves."

And yet the thought haunted him long after the sheikh had retired under Yakoub's care to the quiet of his room. Tonight had witnessed the first casting of the shadow—a presage of the time to come. He sat under the purple-blue of the sky, dimly powdered with stars, answering Saada only in detached monosyllables . . . wondering what the future with this lovely innocent desert child would be. Did it mean social extinction, a separation from his fellows? To a man of Railsford's temperament such a verdict spelt disaster.

Always pride of race had held him. To be regarded as an object of pity or derision . . . was it more than he could stand?

He looked covertly at the profile of the perfectly-moulded face, clear-cut like purest alabaster in the white light of the late-rising moon. The creature of convention in him passed out and gave place to the man. He told himself that at last he knew what held him enthralled . . . the lure of her physical beauty. Watching her now, he was deeply, dreadfully conscious of it . . . that every glance from those dazzling eyes, every movement of the warm, seductive lips, made an appeal which he was powerless to withstand.

The very nearness of her presence made his senses reel. A wave of passion swept over him ; she turned swiftly and saw the blaze in his eyes.

"Why, Lance, what is the matter?" she asked.
"Why do you look at me like that?"

The straightness of that gaze drew him out of a riot of confusion which he tried to hide under a careless laugh.

"Oh, I don't know, sweetheart. I was only thinking—just then—how much I loved you . . . and how glad I shall be when we are married. We seem to have been apart—so long."

"So long, dear!" She laughed merrily and toyed with the ring on her finger. "Why, we have never before been so much together. Don't you remember . . . those dreadful days in London—perhaps I oughtn't to say that, because really I was ever so happy . . . but there were times when we saw each other, alone, only perhaps for an hour on Saturday afternoons . . . unless it was one of those great occasions when your mother asked me to spend the week-end at Redlands."

"You—you don't understand," he said tenderly. "It has been splendid to be with you here in Africa. But I feel that something is keeping us apart ; that . . . I shall never be really happy till we are man and wife."

Her mouth framed an expectant smile.

"That won't be very long, will it? Already part of the time has gone, through this delay. As soon as the house is free——"

"I shall have to see the parson of the little English church here. We must give at least three Sundays' notice for the banns. It will seem such a long time, darling; I wish all the wretched formalities were through, so that you were mine—now."

"I'm certainly not any one else's," she retorted. "And there's very little prospect of my running away."

"Running away!" His strong arm suddenly held her, and he drew her dark head to his shoulder. "I couldn't let you. You've grown so inexpressibly dear."

"I wonder—will you always say that?" she questioned.

"Of course. I haven't changed in the three years I've known you, and I'm not likely to now. Besides, when we're married you'll be a thousand times dearer to me."

"I was wondering, Lance," gently freeing herself and brushing back the loose hair from her forehead, "whether we ought not to postpone our wedding—"

"Good Lord! What for?"

"To give your mother a chance of rejoining us. She'll think it rather strange, our being married without her."

He shook his head.

"It can't be helped. Uncle Hugh may be an unconscionable time in dying. And certainly she'll stay with him to the end. No, Saada, we can't do

that. The plans I've made must stand. You don't want to wait . . . do you?"

Her thoughts were wandering. They had strayed, why she did not know, to a street in the squalid quarter of a reeking city. She stood in a garret room facing a gaunt-framed man whose eyes looked at her full of pity, entreaty, and yearning. She heard his voice above the voice of Railsford at her side: her hand burned at the remembrance of his touch. And then, in a moment, the picture faded; she was back in the garden of the hotel at El Bouira, alone under the white moon and dim stars of Africa, and at her side the other man who within three weeks would be her husband. A little shiver convulsed her; she drew the silken folds of the wrap more closely about her shoulders and rose.

"The wind has freshened," she said quietly. "I am getting cold. Shall we go in?"

CHAPTER X

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD

SAAADA was charmed with the house which was to be her future home. Built only a few years before by a French architect for a retired Tunisian merchant, it had been modelled, in minature, on the Kouba of the Belvedere, and combined all the picturesque charm of an Eastern edifice with the latest European comforts. Outwardly square, of cream-coloured stone, three sides were open, save at the corners, forming a large colonnaded entrance portico supported by Corinthian-capped marble columns. Above these on each face were three arches fitted with the most delicate recessed mesribeyeh work. The flat parapeted roof was domed and cupolaed in the centre and had at each corner a faience-breasted turret surmounted by a gilded crescent and star.

Bongainvillea gave colour to the blanched walls, so that at a short distance the house looked like a structure of old ivory painted over with purple stars. Walks of golden-hued sand stretched between well-trimmed lawns and high banks gay with bloom. The flowers were Saada's special delight—masses of white jasmine, the heavy scent of which was ever in the shady rooms, beds of purple

petunias, pink and white geraniums, flaming poinsettias and trellises of cluster-roses. The background of dark green jamelon trees, of citron and orange foliage starred with golden fruit, toned the vividness of colour and gave a suggestion of quiet restfulness.

Almost at the last moment there was difficulty in securing possession and some months elapsed before the date of the marriage could be finally settled. This gave time, however, for additional furnishings to be sent down from Algiers and Tunis. The walls of the large airy rooms, lit by spacious windows, shielded with green jalousie blinds, were plainly distempered, colour being provided by hanging door embroideries and soft-toned rugs, many of which had been brought from the sheikh's seventeenth-century house and formed his wedding-gift to his daughter.

Saada found her time fully occupied, while Lance was absent up country with a number of French government officials, engaged in settling a tribal dispute that threatened international complications. He returned to find himself immersed beneath a load of work which gave little opportunity to see much of Saada and less still of the house. There was a round of official calls and visits to be paid and other obligations, incidental to his important position, to be fulfilled. The week before his marriage found him depressed by a profound disquiet. In all quarters there was a

scarcely-concealed hostility to the step he was premeditating.

More than ever now he wished Sheikh Medene had not come with them. But for that it was scarcely likely any one would have guessed Saada's parentage. Whatever her own innate feelings, she neither behaved nor looked like an Arab; her long sojourn in Western Europe, coupled with her English education, might well have cloaked the fact which Railsford was so anxious to conceal.

From the first hour of their arrival, however, it had been impossible to keep the matter secret. In the European circles of El Bouira brows were raised and shoulders shrugged, while not a few paid her the half-way compliment of suggesting she might be the child of an English mother by an Arab father, and in the next breath detracted from the concession by describing her as "nigger."

Not unnaturally, Lance was worried. It had been easy enough to assume the "mind-your-own-business" attitude at the contempt or disapproval shown by the hundred and one chance acquaintances which one always makes in foreign lands. But the contempt of people among whom he had to live, occupying, moreover, as he did, a position of considerable public importance, was quite a different matter.

At the eleventh hour he realized that there might be a good deal in the objections which Saada herself had raised. His mother had foreseen them and

had not been slow to issue a warning. The remembrance of it annoyed him exceedingly, knowing that his was not the temper to bear lightly with "I told you so."

He was in this mood of thoughtful and occasionally bitter reflection one evening following his return to El Bouira. At the office in the Rue Tim-gad, where he generally put in an hour or two after lunch, things had not gone well. A letter had come through from the British Consul's department in Algiers questioning, at the instigation of the Foreign Office, a decision he had given in a concession's dispute. This was only a pin-prick to a greater sore. A dinner which was to have been given in his honour, and to which, before their arrival, Saada was invited, had been cancelled on the most flimsy excuse. He knew that behind it lay prejudice against his forthcoming marriage.

Saada had gone to the villa with her father and Yakoub to put the finishing touches to the room set aside to be Railsford's study. He was on the point of exerting himself to face the quarter of an hour's hot walk beyond the town when Salem, the hotel's diminutive page, appeared in a state of considerable excitement.

"Mos' import gentlemans . . . gra' big miling-tary toff to see the Mistah Railsford. Name of Captsing General Bill Bailey wiz no tin hat."

"Bailey? I don't know a Captain Bailey," said Lance, puckering his brows. "You must be mis-

taken, Salem. He hasn't called to see me. You had better——”

Before he could complete the instructions there was a heavy step on the sanded verandah, and a bronzed, middle-aged man in civilian dress greeted Raisford with a cheery wave of his hand.

Lance rose and stared curiously. The newcomer held out a big palm.

“You remember me, don't you, Railsford? I'm Bailey, of Cuspar Court, your father's old friend.”

Lance emitted a surprised laugh.

“Why, of course! General Murrans Bailey. I couldn't place you for a moment. Sit down, General. And Salem, ask Leon to bring two double whiskies and soda, please. Well, this is a stammerer! I'm ever so pleased to see you.”

Bailey took a cigarette and dropped into the nearest basket chair.

“The last time I saw you, Lance, was at a supper in the hall of Trinity. I came up to see my nephew, Grandison; I believe he used to keep on the floor above you in Neville's. Well, how are all your people? Yes, I know your father is dead. Poor chap, I met him the last time I was in England. We lunched together and he asked me down to Norwiche for the shooting.”

Lance forced a faded smile.

“Norwiche is sold, General,” he said tentatively, as he tapped a cigarette on the back of his hand. “I think that was the beginning of a swift end as

far as the pater was concerned. His affairs were terribly involved, you know. The only footing we have left is the little place in Gloucestershire."

"Where your mother still lives, in health and happiness, I trust?"

"My mother is very well, thanks. She was with me up to a few weeks ago."

"Here—in North Africa?"

The younger man nodded.

"In Constantine. She came out for six months, to stay with me till I got the new job shipshape. I've a consular post here."

"So I understand."

"But, unfortunately, just before we were due to come here my uncle took it into his head to be sick unto death, and by way of a sort of dying repentance thought it would be nice to obtain the mater's forgiveness—at least, either that or the hope that she will help to keep him clear a little longer of the flaming gates."

He spoke without sympathy, his only emotion being one of deep-rooted scorn.

"Let's see—wasn't your uncle the well-to-do one of the family?"

Bailey was essentially a materialist.

Railsford looked glum.

"The governor happened to be the younger son, and, like Benjamin, received little besides a blessing. Not that that availed him much. As you know," with a hard laugh, "it was always a pretty hard job to make ends meet."

Bailey's sun-smitten face took on a questioning look.

"I suppose it hasn't occurred to you, Lance, that being the only male Railsford left, there may be a chance of one day coming into your uncle's fortune?"

Lance sneered as he tossed his cigarette end into the cool waters of the fountain below the verandah. The glow expired with a sharp sizzle that covered the exclamation of derision.

"It has occurred to me—as one of those possibilities not in the least likely to happen. I'm afraid that sounds rather paradoxical. Frankly, Uncle Hugh doesn't interest me. Now, tell me, what brings you here?"

Bailey leaned back and casually blew smoke rings into the shimmering sunshine.

"My dear chap, I've spent the best part of my misused life, and certainly the bulk of a commuted pension, in wandering about North Africa. I find it cheap: I've a host of friends; there's plenty of sport to be picked up . . . and what more can a fellow want? Thank God, I'm not married, so I haven't that responsibility. I can't afford to live in England so I just make the best of a very pleasant existence by following the inclinations of a desert Ishmael. I made El Bouira three days ago——"

"Then why in the name of fortune didn't you look me up before? I'm fixed here permanently. At least," a disgruntled edge to his voice, "I suppose I

am. Of course you've heard I'm going to be married."

"I have." The admission was not enthusiastic. "The place is full of it. I heard it first at Mrs. Nelleton's. I arrived just in time to 'do' a garden-party. Later it cropped up at the English club. Since then, my dear fellow," eyeing his young companion with a regretful look, "I've heard little else."

"Oh!" Lance's tone was mildly questioning. "Is a wedding out here such an untoward event?"

Bailey's glance took in both ends of the terrace and the entrance to the hotel. The place slumbered in perfect stillness.

The General dropped back, his hands clasped about his knee.

"I knew your father very well, Lance. He and I were great friends since . . . well—as long as I can remember. His dearest wish was for the happiness and well-being of his only son. My boy," rising and laying a kindly hand on the younger man's shoulder, "you don't think I'm an interfering, meddling old fool?"

Lance looked up.

"General! Of course I don't. But why——?"

"Why am I taking on myself to talk to you about your own affairs—an affair which you might say concerns you alone? Because, Lance, you are the son of my dead friend . . . because I want to see you as happily married as he was. I've heard——"

"Yes?"

"That you are marrying a lady of colour. Is that so?"

Lance smiled—a rather jaded smile, it must be confessed.

"Quite true, General. I'm engaged to Miss Medene, the daughter of an Arab sheikh. We met three years ago in London. I fell in love with her . . ."

"I'm sorry." Bailey looked shocked. "Very sorry—for both your sakes."

"But why?" the other asked, knowing full well what the answer would be. "What does it matter who a fellow marries so long as he's happy in his choice?"

Bailey spoke gravely.

"I'm not an experienced man, Lance. If ever a fellow has knocked about the world, touched society at its lowest and highest, I have. And, as you know, the greater part of my life has been spent East of Suez—mostly in India. There, especially, I've seen the consequences of unions such as you contemplate. You could not make a bigger mistake."

"You forget, General: Miss Medene is the daughter of a well-born, highly-cultured Arab. The sheikh——"

The other lifted his hands.

"You know the lines, 'East is east . . . ' I won't repeat them. By Jove, they're the truest ever written on the question of colour."

"But there are degrees," Lance persisted.

Bailey negated the suggestion with a lift of his hand.

"There are no degrees. The streak is there, whether full or slight. It is bound to come to the top. You can't hide it. Stop me, if I am saying too much."

"I know you mean to be kind."

"My boy, it's for your good. It's a duty I owe to my dead friend—to warn you in time."

Railsford looked serious.

"I know people have been talking. They always do in an isolated place. If they didn't they'd die of *ennui*. So they've seized upon my approaching marriage as a subject for gossip."

"It isn't that altogether," the other replied. "Agreed, they like to talk. And marriage between a white man and a native, or *vice versa*, always provides fruitful ground. I'm not thinking of them at all, Lance; I'm thinking only of you . . . and as your father's friend, I beg of you to reconsider your decision . . . and not to marry this Arab girl."

Lance pretended to take the matter lightly.

"Of course I can't do that, General. My engagement has been publicly announced and everything is ready—in fact, the wedding will take place within a week. I've hired a house, put new furniture in, and generally made the usual arrangements for settling down. Apart from which if I don't marry Saada I certainly shouldn't want to

marry any one else. You wouldn't like to see me go through life a benedict?"

Bailey's grizzled brows rose. He grunted audibly as he leaned forward to pick up his glass. With his fingers round the tumbler he looked across at Railsford.

"I always had a notion, young man, that you would do big things." His manner was gruff, though kindly. "At Cambridge you did remarkably well. In the Service you're thought a great deal more of than perhaps you imagine. I know . . . because I knock about from one corner of the globe to another. I've heard you spoken of as far apart as Singapore and Bagdad—as a coming man. You can guess what that means—some one high up has marked you for promotion. D'you think you'll ever get it . . . tied for life to a native woman?"

The look in Railsford's eyes became graver. For years he had worked and waited for the chance which El Bouira had brought—his first step to a big appointment in the East. And no longer could he hide from himself the fact that money and position meant a very great deal. At home things were uncommonly tight, and every year his mother's income was dwindling so much that before long—unless he himself could save the situation—the last bit of Railsford property must go into the market.

"I had a long tough fight—to bring myself to

talk to you like this," Bailey went on. "When first I heard the news I was tempted to say nothing. Then fragments of idle talk began to reach me: bits of gossip retailed in the club and business quarters in the town. I met men—and women too—with whom you ought to be friendly. I find one and all have decided to cold-shoulder you if this marriage takes place."

Lance set down his glass and stared in blank astonishment at his friend.

"Good Lord, General, will it be as bad as all that?"

Bailey eyed him steadily.

"My dear boy, it will be a hundred times worse. You're simply committing social suicide. I don't know the young lady—she may be, possibly is, the most charming person in the world; most of these educated coloured women are—but she's a nigger, and—"

"There I'm inclined to disagree with you," replied Lance obstinately. "To my mind a nigger is a black, and Miss Medene is no more black than you or I. In fact, General; unless any one told you she was Arab, you would put her down as European with an early Oriental upbringing. She is dark . . . every girl brought up from her birth in the East is. The sun produces a darkness of hair and a tanned skin which never entirely vanishes. Look at yourself, now—as brown as a berry, as bronzed as any native. That wouldn't keep you, General, from marrying an English girl?"

Bailey bowed in acknowledgment.

"Admitted! Admitted! But in the first place this is a question of blood. All Arabs belong to the black races. True, at one time they reached a degree of civilization so high that to this day it has left its mark on Western Europe—on Spain in particular. But the argument has been worn threadbare; the roots of many of our sciences are buried deep in a civilization which was old when our land was still in the dark ages of barbarism. I mean the Chinese. Would you, on this account, marry a yellow girl?"

"Arabs are different altogether from Chinks."

"In what respect? Shall I tell you? It won't sound pleasant, partly because it is so true. The yellow races are moral, their moral code based on the strictest in the world, Buddhism and Confucianism. The Arabs are not; from the Little Sahara to the sea, from Arabia to Morocco, a lascivious, sensual, passion-loving people. It is in their blood, the heritage of the ages; and to transmit such through a white strain is about as mad a proposition as any sane man could contemplate."

Lance sat up very straight, his hands nervously interlocked. There was something rather alarming in the line of reflection Bailey had started.

"I—I hadn't thought much about that. To me Saada seems the same as any other nice girl. I've never really associated her with Eastern ideas and Eastern ways."

Bailey lay back staring up at the matchless blue

of the sky shimmering behind a haze of sunlight. The hot air was drowsy with the perfume of flowers, and the music of bird and insect life produced a curiously lulling effect.

"You feel all this, don't you?" he said, raising his arm. "The pulsing heat, the pleasant drugging of the senses, are part of the lure and charm of Africa. But think of it—how for a thousand years it has eaten into the hearts and lives of these people. Look at the women—rich and poor, high or low. Shut away, languorous, effete . . . their natures amorous and sensual. They dream, talk, live on love . . . on sheer animal passion. And the men are worse, thanks to the polygamy allowed by the Mohammedan law. Call it a religion if you like. I call it a creed of lust, of legalized pandering to the lowest instincts in man. They are not altogether to be blamed: climatic conditions and easy circumstances are largely responsible, coupled with the fact that out here Nature seems to cast all her women in a lovely mould."

"I have always thought them strictly moral," protested Railsford.

"According to their lights, yes; because life here and life hereafter, the myriad years of Paradise at the back of all their faith, means nothing more than the physical love of men for women and women for men. Look at their literature, in which they are soaked from the cradle to the grave; is it anything better than a perpetual encouragement to unbridled passion?"

"You are speaking of a people, not of individuals."

Bailey bowed.

"Exactly. There you hit the right nail on the head. But remember each individual is representative of the whole. That is why all whites hang together and array themselves against blacks, brown, and yellow. We belong to a race which possesses, and always has done, an instinctive repulsion against the order of colour. We know from history, from personal experience, that the two things can never be successfully blended. There are religious reasons, social reasons, physiological reasons, and they all tend to keep white and coloured blood apart."

"There have been happy marriages."

"As rare, my boy, as the dodo. Yours might be one of the great exceptions. But, all things considered, the risk is too great. Look at the social side first—how many men are big enough and strong enough to stand up under it: the isolation, the contempt, the cold-shouldering? I've seen so much in India—the once-honoured Englishman shorn of his friends, of caste, of that respect which is part and parcel of the existence in a foreign land. He retires, or rather is retired, to the seclusion of his own family circle. Children come along: hated by their mother because they possess the pride and ambition of their father; despised by him because those selfsame qualities fail to ring true. To him they are make-believe, sham, a rest-

less striving for something they can never attain. They grow up scorned by their own people, despised by the white race to which they aspire. The world shuns them; they are less than the dust, and all through the years they stand at a barred gate, looking towards a Land of Promise they can never reach."

Railsford was visibly affected. This man had touched chords long dormant: pride of birth, and of tradition, the heritage of the well-born Englishman.

Bailey continued, speaking with a sincerity in which he faithfully believed,

"I understand, perhaps as well as you, the charm and lure of the East. It searches most men in their time; finds out a few and leaves them in a hell of their own making. The women are beautiful; everything here is beautiful, from the uprising to the going down of the sun. But afterwards comes the dark, which only eyes trained to see can penetrate. Lance, I want you to see before it is too late."

"Why—why didn't I think of all this before?" he asked suddenly, and pushing back his chair, moved out of the sunlight into the cool shadow of the trees. "In England one never gave a moment to such thoughts."

Bailey regarded him over his shoulder.

"Surely your mother, as a woman of the world——"

"Mother has never been quite happy about it. It

seemed to me, though, she was thinking more of social position than of my happiness."

"My dear boy, the two are inextricably mixed up. How can a man be happy when he finds the whole world—his world—against him? Let him be one of those rare and wonderful cases who loves his wife, be she red, black, or yellow, more than the opinions and the treatment he receives from his fellows. He is still burnt up when he looks upon the treatment accorded her. And worse is to follow. When the children come . . . what is their fate? It always ends the same way. If the parents live in England, the poor little devils are banished to the East . . . and the mother's heart is broken. If the father and mother live out East they are sent home to be put to school or farmed out among money-grabbers. Either way the family circle is broken, and there is general unhappiness and dissatisfaction all round."

Lance drew up and stared unsteadily into the burning eye of the sun. On his face the moisture stood out in tiny beads; both mind and body were conscious of acute discomfort.

"I'm afraid . . . I must confess," he admitted slowly, "Saada herself tried to put all this to me, though not in quite such detail."

The General sighed.

"You appear to have been adequately warned. Heaven knows, I wouldn't have opened my mouth had it not been for the talk going round in El Bouira. Then I thought of your father, and what

he would wish were he alive. And I thought, too, of a promising career nipped in the bud."

Railsford walked to the end of the verandah and came back to the table.

"Frankly, I haven't paid as much attention to the future as I should have done," he admitted thoughtfully. "Do you really believe it will make so much difference? Thanks, I won't smoke now."

Bailey lit another cigarette.

"You know the Service, Lance—the closest corporation in the world; and rightly so, because it represents an Empire. You fellows of the consular and diplomatic service are the vanguard of a great tradition. These people look up to you, respect you. Do they ever respect a white man who descends to their own level? Not much! They regard him as one of themselves and all respect disappears. Conversely, the same holds good. One meets lots of important folk in the East—merchants, travellers, scientists, Government officials and military big-bugs. They are all an inseparable part of your existence. Together they make or break you; and with a coloured wife you would be broken in six months."

"The picture certainly doesn't look too attractive," Lance said, laughing weakly.

The General reached up and touched the other's sleeve.

"You've seen the attractive side and succumbed to it—the lure, possibly, of a pretty face and charming manner. Mind you, I feel horrible in

talking like this. Miss Medene is no doubt a most charming girl: from all accounts, I believe she is . . . and certainly her old father has a fine reputation everywhere. But my contention is, and always will be, you cannot, with satisfactory results, mix English and Arab blood. However"—he jumped up and dusted the sprinkle of fine sand from his clothes—"I hope I haven't exceeded my privilege as an old family friend?"

"Of course, General, I understand. You are thinking of my good."

"Absolutely, my boy, absolutely. I'm a rolling stone, and goodness knows I've gathered little enough moss. But at least I've escaped the fate reserved for so many of my friends. I'd like to see you doing—well, just what your father would wish. You'll excuse me for hurrying away?"

"Won't you stay to dinner and meet Miss Medene? Perhaps then you might feel differently about her."

Bailey drew out his watch.

"Thanks, but I must be off. I promised to dine with Professor Phillipson and his wife at their villa. He's planning a new expedition across the Sahara, and he wants me to go with him. They leave tomorrow, so you see . . ."

Lance left him at the end of the gardens and watched the fine soldierly figure swing down the road through the rose-coloured twilight. He went back to his seat on the verandah feeling curiously ill at ease. A score of times he wished Bailey had not

found him—to resurrect doubts which both Saada and his mother in turn had raised in his mind.

The solitude bothered him: he went in for his hat, and turning his back on the hotel, hurried through the town in the direction of the villa.

Saada met him on the steps of the canopied pavilion. She looked tired, but happy.

“Come and see what we have made of your room, dear,” she said, linking her arm through his.

He passed into the delicious coolness of the high apartments hung with Oriental draperies and hangings. The floors were dotted with nacre-topped tables; brass braziers of native workmanship stood in the recesses. And about the stone columns supporting the Moorish horseshoe arches, flowers were banked in immense tubs of Kabyle pottery. The effect was soothing and purely Eastern; a perfume like the smell of incense hung in the air. He glanced at Saada, a truly Eastern figure surrounded by the beauties of her home, and the General’s warning recurred with added force. Insensibly the West was being merged in the subtle influence of the Orient.

CHAPTER XI

THE SACRED CIRCLE

LANCE followed Saada from one room to another, trying hard to share her enthusiasm, yet secretly troubled by the effect which the surroundings produced. He knew that the house was beautiful, but the quick falling of the twilight filled the place with shadows and produced a sombreness as heavy as his own grey thoughts. The lamps had not been lighted, and they hung from the high ceilings, dead, bulbous shapes as unresponsive as himself.

He felt he ought at least to try and show pleasure, for Sheikh Medene, out of the goodness of his big, generous heart, had stripped his once beautiful home of many of its choicest treasures. The cabinet in the drawing-room was filled with rare specimens of Tunisian glass—crystal bowls shaped as turbans, plates and dishes of rare enamel, gold ornaments heavily chased, bangles and khal-khals of beaten silver, and a set of plaques jewelled with precious stones, heirlooms that had been for centuries in the possession of the Medene family.

In the vestibule and dining-room were big oaken coffers wondrously carved and ornamented with Arabesque designs in brass: to Railsford, in the

gloom, they seemed merely depressing. Even the pains which Saada had taken to make his study the last thing in comfort drew nothing more than an ungracious nod of lukewarm approval, and many times as he followed her upstairs and down he wished General Bailey and his well-meaning advice at the bottom of the sea.

By the time Saada locked the front door behind her the western glow had melted from tawny gold into the velvety blueness which precedes the uprising of the moon. The road stretched like a bar of silver to the wall that still seemed to keep guard over the ancient Arab town. Along the road rolled open carriages conveying members of English and French families to visit friends in the villas on the fringe of the oases of El Oukrit. Some of them merely nodded coldly to the distinguished looking Englishman; others, taking advantage of the gloom, passed on without even offering salutations.

The studied rudeness was not lost on the aged sheikh. He had seen so much of it in the last few weeks. He walked proudly, his head high, his slight frame as rigid as the gold-topped cane in his twitching hand. That which, all along, he had feared in secret was surely coming to pass: the white population of El Bouira was resentful at the intrusion of his daughter into the sacred circle. He kept his thin lips tight and his hawk-like face grim, but there leapt to his eyes a flash of angry scorn when he looked at Saada.

She hastened on, however, chatting gaily at her

sweetheart's side as though nothing untoward had happened. When they reached the hotel the place was already humming with animation, every window a blaze of light, the soft cadence of a stringed band coming from the crowded dining-room. In the courtyard at the side a number of motors were parked, the chauffeurs busy handing down luggage to perspiring Arab porters.

"A large party in from Biskra," Lance remarked, as they ascended the steps. "We've driven it rather late. Can you manage to change quickly?"

Saada nodded and hurried off to her room. In the bustle she had little time to reflect on the disappointment which Lance's reception of her efforts had caused. Fresh visitors were arriving—diners out from the residential quarter—glad to get away from the town after the day's work was done. As she went down with Lance and her father she recognized several to whom she had been introduced since her arrival: all were too busy studying menu cards to look up.

The general atmosphere was charged with an air of gaiety. Everybody seemed to be talking, the new-comers chatting over the events of their long journey. In such an assemblage of sound and animation one quickly becomes conscious of the existence of a little backwater where quiet reigns. Seated at a small table near to Saada and her companions were a silent couple who might have belonged altogether to a different order of things—a thick-set dwarfish-looking man with a round

smiling face, as red and glowing as the sun at dawn, and a girl, apparently his daughter.

The couple attracted Saada's attention immediately, for it was obvious they had travelled with the party, and yet were not of them; two of life's misfits who find difficulty in accommodating themselves to an unaccustomed position. Unlike all the rest, who were in evening dress, the man wore a much-used suit of tweeds—a sports jacket, breeches, coloured stockings and serviceable brown boots. From the crown of his shock of straw-coloured hair, slightly streaked with silver, to the soles of his large feet, he looked what indeed he was—a rough diamond.

That nobody except the waiters appeared to pay the slightest attention to him, apparently did not bother him at all; in a strong voice redolent with a perfect East End accent he gave his orders in a spirit of marked good-humour.

Saada strove hard to repress a smile as she heard him say,

“Entry cot. What’s an entrycot o’ mutton? Blest if I know. Do you, Hetty? Oh, that’s what it is, is it? Well, bring some, waiter. I daresay it’s very noice, and if it ain’t, I shan’t blame you. Drinks! Champagne? Not a bit of it, lad; I never touch the stuff, but if you can mix up suthin’ sweet and nice-tastin’ for that gel o’ mine, quite teetotal, you know, well, she’ll bless you wi’ them kind eyes of hers . . . and here’s something to pay you for your trouble. Now, listen, garsong,” lay-

ing a big coarse hand familiarly on the waiter's arm. "Me and mine—this is mine," pointing to the pleasant-faced girl, "is here for a couple o' months; and if you look after Theodore Snitch and Co.—take my word for it, he'll look after you."

Saada felt irresistibly drawn to the small Snitch family of two: a father whose proud eye scarcely ever left his plain daughter's face, and a daughter who anticipated every wish of her rough, good-natured father. The way in which each looked after the other was wonderful; a dozen times he asked her if she was "liking all she'd got"; and a dozen times she restrained her healthy appetite to attend to her father's simple requirements.

Lance, too, had noticed them. He turned to Saada after a prolonged stare, during which diverse emotions chased across his aristocratic face,

"Really, I don't know what the times are coming to. That fellow on your right is obviously one of the *nouveau riche*, a war-profiteer, by the look of him. Look at the way he eats—as though he hadn't tasted food for a week. I really think people like that might have the decency to put up at a hotel where they can mix with men and women of their own stamp."

Saada smiled sweetly.

"But, dear, they're ever so hungry," she remonstrated gently. "I heard the lady at the table behind you saying that a mishap had occurred to the car in which nine of them were travelling and that they were held up for two days in the desert

. . . without food or water—except for a lunch-eon-basket which Mr. Snitch had with him.”

Railsford grimaced.

“Trust any one with a name like that to look after himself. Well!”

“And he insisted on sharing it with the rest. I think it’s a shame that any one should be cold-shouldered simply because they haven’t quite as much veneer as so-called gentle people.”

Railsford turned his head.

“What I complain of is, they do things which aren’t done, so to speak, in decent society. Look at the girl now . . . using her napkin like a hand-kerchief; and the old man pointing out the beauties of ceiling decoration with his knife and fork. You can’t wonder at their being cold-shouldered.”

An aristocratic young man in faultless evening dress was crossing the large dining-hall, followed by a friend. He paused half-way to light a cigarette; the match-flame showed up the black intaglio of arms with supporters in his ring. He came to where Railsford sat, nodded frigidly to Saada and her father, then said, with a hee-haw in his voice as he set his hands on the table,

“I say, Railsford, old fruit, you didn’t roll up for that handicap. We’re playing it off tonight. Can’t you possibly manage to come along?”

Lance glanced across at Saada.

“I’m afraid, Featherstone, I’m engaged for this evening. I should like to, but——”

“My dear, why don’t you?” Saada interposed

quickly. "You love billiards and you'd enjoy yourself ever so much. Father will be going to bed, and I've such heaps of things to do."

"I certainly should love to come," Railsford admitted. "Are you sure, dear, you won't feel lonely?"

The girl shook her head.

"Really, I wish you'd go. I must look over my clothes."

"Right ho, old top. We shall expect you at the club house at nine o'clock."

He swung round on his heel, and lounged out.

"One of the best, is old Featherstone," Railsford mused, bending over his glass. "Strange, my striking him here after eight years. He's Lord Brachleigh's heir, you know. . . . You're very quiet tonight."

"Am I?"

She laughed and broke the train of reflection. She was thinking she preferred the Snitches to all the Featherstones inside or on the fringe of Debrett.

Lance laid down his serviette and followed her to the door.

"You are sure you don't mind my going? It rather looks as though I'm neglecting you." The tone was only mildly self-condemning. "But as you've so much to do . . ."

The rest was lost in the surge as the diners thronged into the vestibule and streamed away in little knots to the smoke-room, the drawing-room,

or the terrace. Saada moved to the hotel steps to wait until Lance came down. Theodore Snitch and his daughter, looking rather out of place, had hung back until the room emptied. At the foot of the stairs the girl turned to her father.

"I've several letters to write: you go and enjoy your cigar in the garden."

"Right!" he called out cheerily. "And when I think you're through, we'll get together and go over Flaubert's *Salambo*. I want you to read me again that bit where they made a mess-up of the Roman gentry's gardens and set Carthage on fire. My, but that was fine, Het! Don't forget to look the book out."

He passed out, a solitary little figure as he stood alone in his rough tweeds, while the well-dressed men and exquisitely-gowned women eddied past and were lost in the silence of the grounds.

The sheikh had gone to his room; in a little while Railsford came down, a light dust-coat over his arm.

"Don't wait up for me, there's a dear girl," he said as he kissed her. "We shall probably have a late sitting. You'd better be getting along to the drawing-room or you'll miss the coffee."

"I shall come with you as far as the gates," she said, and linking her arm through his, they went down the sanded path together.

Saada went back in a curiously thoughtful mood. Each day she was learning more and more of Lance's character. There were sides to it of which,

in the first flush of their love, she had never dreamed. She had thought him so high above all other men. By degrees she was becoming conscious of having raised an idol of clay liable at any time to crash to the ground and break in a hundred pieces. Tonight he had shown in himself a reflection of his mother's nature . . . and the picture had not been good to look upon.

She went slowly up the steps. Behind the long windows of the drawing- and smoke-rooms an eager throng was gathered about the red-fezzed and zouave-jacketed Arab waiters serving delicious Turkish coffee in tiny gilded cups. A little distance off Mr. Snitch was leaning over the balustrade deliberately cutting the end from a long cigar. He lifted his battered panama politely as Saada, a slim, graceful figure in white, appeared at the top of the steps.

She made a pleasant bow, and ventured, in a friendly tone,

“I’m afraid you won’t get your coffee unless you go quickly. It is so delicious, and very much sought after . . .”

Theodore Snitch beamed.

“My dear young lady, it’s very kind of you to take interest in a stranger like me. I’m not wanting any, thanks . . . but if, as you say, there’s a rush on it so as them what don’t rush don’t get, then . . . permit me . . .”

He stuffed the long weed in his vest pocket, ran lightly across the vestibule and was lost among the

coffee-servers. A minute later he reappeared, perspiring but triumphant . . . a cup in one hand and a chair in the other.

"Now," he said, setting the cup on the marble-topped table, "just you sit down there and enjoy your coffee in comfort. Maybe you'll let me smoke and talk to you. I love some one to talk to. Funny, ain't it, miss, but the penalty of having made a cool million o' money—p'r'aps a bit more—by sheer hard work, is that no one among your own people wants to have anything to do with you?"

"Mind you, I'm not a whiner," Snitch went on, leaning back in the bamboo chair while his ruddy, good-natured face beamed up at the stars. "In my short time I've had almost as many knocks as most people—my, it would break my Het's heart to hear me forgettin' to talk proper: I do drop back into the real Stratford way; but you don't mind, do you? Well, as I was saying, Miss—Miss—what's your name——"

"Saada Medene."

"Miss Saada Medene; that sounds real pretty to me . . . and don't forget to drink your coffee, or you'll find it so thick the spoon'll stick in it. Where 'were we? Ah, I know! Talking about those funny people here, who find a sense o' humour in turning the frozen eye on Theodore James Snitch and his daughter. You've never met my gel, have you?"

"I saw her with you at dinner," Saada replied.
"I thought she might be your daughter."

"And as fine a lass as ever an old man was blessed with. Excuse me smoking, but I can't do without my weed. Strange how these things get a hold on you." He cracked a seven-inch Havana between his thumb and forefinger. "Time was, young lady, when I used to smoke a cutty—the real genuine penny clay wi' shag in it. Then I jumped to a bob briar; and now . . . well, at six bob each these are meat and drink to me."

"You mustn't smoke too many or you'll be getting ill," Saada remonstrated gently.

The little man laughed and showed gold-filled teeth.

"My! but that sounds funny. T. J. Snitch being ill! Not when he's got a first-class nurse like Henrietta at his elbow! Which brings me back to where we were when we kicked off—you think Henrietta a nice gel, eh?"

Saada could not fail to catch the note of eagerness behind the question.

"I should think she is a very nice girl indeed. She has a sweet face and appears most devoted to you."

Mr. Snitch's flat palm came down with a resounding slap on his fat knee.

"You've hit it . . . she's a real good 'un—one o' the best. But, d'you know," the humorous twinkle dying out of the mild eyes, which became

grave, "I'm thinking of leaving her, of cutting the cable between her and the old dad and letting her steer a course all on her own."

"But why?" Saada asked, suddenly interested.

"Why?" the strange little man proceeded. "Because you see what keeping an old tub like me in tow means. Tonight was a proof of it." He waved his hand and indicated the lighted windows behind which a hundred guests were gathered. "D'you think there's one among that crowd wants to know my gel so long as she's hooked up to me? Not a bit of it; not a little bit. For all his money, Theodore Snitch ain't good enough. . . . But I tell you —she's worth the whole lot put together. There's not a man or woman in those rooms, for all their jewels and fine clo's, can hold a candle to my gel for character. She's got 'em all beaten to a frizzle."

"I'm quite sure of it," Saada agreed.

The red round face was smiling again.

"I like talking to you. It does me good . . . sort of safety-valve to T. J. S. which keeps him runnin' under an even head of steam. If I bottled it all up too long I'd go off pop . . . and then, my hat! the bits would fly—and there'd be a mess all round. But you've got understanding, and you can see how it irks me when my Hetty's cold-shouldered and glass-eyed just because she's got an old dad who's a bit rough in the make-up. I felt real touched-up tonight . . . as she and me sat in that big room all alone. Comic, isn't it, to feel lonely among scores of people?"

The simple words reached a soft chord in Saada's heart. There was a warm, pulsing humanity about the little squat figure in sympathy with the hidden side of her own nature. She, too, from a different cause, had felt this same ache of loneliness, this yearning for understanding and companionship in a world strangely cold and secretly hostile.

"I hope you won't feel lonely as long as we are here," she said kindly. "We live in El Bouira, and I'm sure we shall be glad to see you both at any time."

The blue eyes widened in amaze.

"You mean that?"

"Certainly. You are strangers in a strange land. We speak the same tongue. That alone should suffice to make us friends."

"Friends! I've almost forgot the meaning of the word." His tone was bitter now. "It makes me wish at times I'd never coined the money. I remember—hope you're not getting fed-up . . ."

Saada shook her dark *petite* head.

"Well, then, Miss Medene, I remember when I was a poor chap, working at Harris's soap works just outside Stratford . . . I had heaps o' pals. My! but we was pore then, and every Saturday night I had to put the rent, six bob I remember it come to, on the clock; and then, all of a sudden, I struck this idea for Snitch's Patent Oil Cake. For five years I worked on it in my spare time, but I won through, and soon had things goin' strong—

in more ways than one. Then the war came. The Government applied for cattle-fodder. I wanted to fight, but they said I was too tight about the Plimsoll mark to do good. So I put in my price for Snitch's best—eighty per cent. lower than everybody else's, because I didn't want long profits out of a country that was fighting for me and mine. But my word! . . . in a month you couldn't find me for orders. They just swamped in from all the world . . . France, Italy, Japan, America. I netted a million, after giving two away: I might have had ten. And now I've got my reward. The men and women I gave my brains and time to, don't know me or mine. It's a rum world, ain't it?"

"Some people certainly are difficult to understand," she admitted.

He stared at the glowing end of the cigar, and turned the long brown weed thoughtfully between his fingers.

"Scarcely any one knows how much I might have made from the Government, if I'd had the mind: millions more. Some chap high up knew. He offered an O. B. E.: I refused it. Then they came along with the better-class things, with a ribbon and a K. C. in front. Could I see myself Sir Theodore J. Sniteh, K. C. B. E.? Not a bit of it, my dear. My missis could, though; so could my sons and three other daughters. Living in Park Lane they are today, on an allowance I make 'em . . . twenty thousand a year. Het, she stuck to

me, and here we are, together, as merry and bright as a couple o' new ha'pennies."

"It sounds most romantic—and certainly very creditable," Saada agreed. "I'm ever so sorry if people aren't nice to you."

"Nice!" he echoed scornfully. "They don't want to be nice to folk who won't dress for dinner or say 'Bai Jove!' and 'How wipping!' I'm a blunt, plain stick, I am: an' I don't sport a crest or swank about my hancestors—and so we sit in carriages all alone, we ride our camels a bit way distant from the rest . . . and at table we're stuck in corners, so as not to give offence . . . jest because people won't be their real true selves. At times I get fed-up and tell my gel she ought not to stick to the old man. What do you think about it, Miss Medene?"

Saada's manner was serious.

"There is only one thing to think, Mr. Snitch. You and your daughter are happy together. She wouldn't want to leave you merely to win social approval. A good many of us have to face and endure what the world thinks and says. What does it matter so long as we remain true to ourselves?"

"My! but that's well thought out and nicely put; my sentiments to a 'T,' except when I get a fit o' the blues . . . same as tonight; then I begin to wonder and ask myself questions, and it takes a little touch of real humanity to set me right agen."

"You will remain happy while the rest pass on," the girl continued. "Here there is so much that is

beautiful—the sun, the warmth, the blue sky and the wonderful flowers. They help to make life very beautiful."

"I guess you've settled in these parts, then?"

"Yes, I am going to be married and spend a good many years in North Africa."

"Well, that's fine! Now shall I tell you what me and Het are doin'?"

"I'd like to know."

"Perhaps," stroking his chin reflectively, "you could help me. I'm in a bit of a quan-dary—that's the right word, isn't it? I'm settling, for a year or two at any rate, with my gel in Tunis."

"I was born in Tunis, Mr. Snitch. My father lives there. Where is your house?"

"I've bought a place—mebbe you know it, the old palace of Dar Cheikh Ben Hassen in Sidi Ben Said."

"Yes, I have often seen it—close to the Palais du Bey at La Marsa."

"You've got it . . . a wonderful cream-coloured place with domes and spires and little minarets, between the Phare and the Archbishop's palace. That's to be our home, Miss Medene, when we've finished with it . . . but the finishing's the job."

"Oh!"—her interest deepening.

"It was like this," the little man continued. "I got dead beat with England. I'm too low down in the social scale for there to be much room for me. I left them as like the 'tuft-huntin'' to it. Het and me come out here, to a fresh land. And when

we saw Dar Cheikh Ben Hassen, well, we simply fell in love with it at first sight . . . the marble paved courtyards, the columns sneaked from Carthage, the fountains what oughter be filled wi' gold-fish and ain't; the balconies where creepers and trailing roses and flowers in pots should stand . . . only the pots are empty. And then the big airy rooms with high gilded beds, an' carved stone winders . . . my! but don't you think that mesribeyeh work—is bee-ooti-ful?"

"I can imagine the Dar Cheikh Ben Hassen being made fit for a king."

"Now, if that's not my very idea! Gee, but it's clever of you to think of it. I mean to make it fit for a king; not king Snitch, tho' he'll live in it till it's finished, but the King of England; and if His Majesty refuses of it then I'll make it over . . . a gift to the British people in Tunisia."

"I'm certain they will appreciate your generosity."

The little man shook his head.

"It's not a matter o' generosity at all, Miss Medene. It's a responsibility which should fall on a rich man. Let me explain, if I can. When I set foot in this wonderful land ten months ago what did I see? Art treasures, some of the mos' wonderful treasures in the world, thought no more of than—that," snapping his fingers. "Loot from ancient cities like Athens and Syracuse; statues, carvings and arches left to decay in Carthage, Douagga and Roman cities that scarcely any one

knows anything about: mosaics, enamels, coloured tiles, pottery, vases and furniture hundreds of years old. Says I to myself, 'Theodore, here's a chanst to do real good with your money. Save those relics from destruction for future generations; get 'em together in a fine house, give 'em to the King or the British nation, and when you're gone at least some one will reap the benefit."

"The notion's splendid. I suppose you came south to add to your collection?" said Saada enthusiastically.

"That's it. I've bought the palace, and at the moment it's being cleaned up, ready to receive the things. But now comes the difficulty I spoke of. I haven't the taste or the knowledge to know what is real and what is fake. Mind you, I must have the best . . . no hole-and-corner business is good enough for me."

"There are dealers and experts like Ahmed Jhemal in the Souk el Attarine in Tunis who would advise you honestly."

"I know, but Mr. Jhemal isn't here—a hundred miles across the desert. He's got his own business to attend to. I had a look round, a month ago, before I came here, right down west, in the Arab country beyond Tunisia, and visited the half-buried Roman city which they now call Beni El Ourit, beyond the oasis of Kheiroun. It belonged to an Arab sheikh named Okba. I agreed to give him a quarter of a million francs for the site, just as it is.

My! but there's heaps of stuff there in the way of marble and carved stone."

"Your difficulty is transport?"

"No. Honesty. I want some one to watch my interests. A man who I can trust. They're not easy to find nowadays. I've been looking round, and what I'm afraid of is . . . as the best things are brought to the surface, they'll disappear."

"It would be a thousand pities."

"And then," the millionaire went on, "I want some one who can travel round to other cities in Tunisia and Algeria and buy up old carpets, rugs, and hangings; real antique Arab furnishings, like chests, tables, and mirrors. I suppose you don't know of anybody?"

In the back of Saada's mind a strange thought was stirring. Was it possible such a wonderful opportunity could be secured for John Williams?

"I see; it's got you guessing," Snitch broke in on the reflection.

"Yes," she answered, setting down her cup, "I do know some one . . . a gentleman by birth and education, a man who loves and admires beautiful things. I believe he would jump at the chance."

Snitch looked delighted.

"Then bring him along here. I don't mind what I pay so long as he's honest and will serve me well. Are you quite sure——"

He caught the troubled expression in her eyes. Her voice quivered with emotion when she spoke.

"I could get him easily enough, but I think, before you decide, I ought to tell you the sort of man he has been. I—I would trust him with my life, but perhaps when you hear what I have to say you might not care to employ him."

The millionaire regarded Saada curiously. Her face had become suffused with warm colour; her eyes had brightened, her whole manner was more animated.

"I guess you're speaking about a brother o' yours who's gone wrong," Snitch, remarkably quick of perception, suggested. "Well, if that's so, I reckon on the fact o' your trusting him is good enough for me . . . and no man shall ever say T. J. S. refused to hold out a helping hand."

Saada's lips set purposefully.

"Not my brother, but my friend: one who has sunk to the lowest depths and is fighting splendidly to get up again."

"By Caractacus, the very chap for me!" cried the little man, bringing down his clenched fist with a resounding smack into the palm of his hand. "Give me a fighter . . . any size, weight or colour . . . and I'm willing to put my money on him. There's only one point, though: would he understand those oojilapper things such as bronzes, statuary, and the like? I must have some one who knows."

Saada nodded.

"Of course. He has been in North Africa a good many years, though what he used to be or do I

can't say. He goes by the name of John Williams. I met him under very terrible circumstances. I was in danger, in the native quarter of Constantine; he came to my aid—at the risk of his life . . . and saved me. Since then, of course, I've taken a very great interest in him."

"Bet your sweet life you have," agreed Snitch. "Can't do too much for a chap like that. But what's his trouble—drink or women?"

Saada's head moved sadly.

"Worse than that. He used to drug himself into a state of coma—some stuff which the lower-class natives use to induce pleasant dreams; I believe a kind of *haschish*. I found him in a terrible state—hopeless, without friends. But"—her voice suddenly softening to a tone of abstraction—"that meeting with me seemed to change him, to give him encouragement, and—"

"Gee! but you're the type of woman to give any man hope. I'll lay a tenner to a square of oil cake he'd do anything for you."

She smiled.

"I believe he would. He promised to try. It was most difficult to know what to do. I felt like giving him money: he was so poor, with only the few wretched rags he stood up in. His home was a bare attic in an Arab house. He seldom ate anything, although he was so big, and he might have been such a fine strong man. I would have liked my *fiancé* to help him . . . but he was too proud. He went away, and we never saw him again in

Tunis. But one evening, a few months ago, in the Square at Batna, I saw him . . . working as a cameleer."

"Gad! but that's low down for a white man! Excuse me . . . I forgot myself. You understand, don't you? I'm a bit rough at times . . . and it makes me wild to think of one o' my own countrymen slaving for a native camel-owner."

The brightness in her eyes was the measure of her faith.

"He did not seem to mind so long as he was standing alone. I made inquiries. He is trying to give up the drug. He works sixteen, sometimes eighteen hours a day for a mere pittance. But he is paying his simple way, and I understand he is very proud of that."

"As well he might be. Good luck to him." Snitch rose and laid a strong hand on her shoulder. "And you say," moving to the side of the terrace and resting his elbows on the balustrading, "he's a gentleman?"

"Absolutely. His people, I believe, belong to an old county family; he doesn't want them to know how low he has fallen."

"So that's why he calls himself Williams?"

"I suppose so. He has never spoken to any one—except me—about his earlier life."

"And you know where to find him?"

"Yes. I have his address."

"Perhaps you'd write on my behalf?"

She was silent a moment.

"I think I had better leave that to you. You may mention my name, if you like . . . or when you leave here you might go and see him in Batna."

"I'm not leaving here." The little man's manner was jocose. "I've found a comfy perch. This hotel is a topper . . . my! but did you ever eat such a dinner as they gave us tonight? Besides, I can make El Bouira my headquarters, and if this fellow Williams pans out all right, he can operate from here. I wish you'd just write down his address."

He passed over notebook and pencil. In the dazzling clearness, with a moon riding grandly above the tall eucalyptus trees, Saada wrote as easily as by day. Snitch followed the gliding motion of the pencil.

"My, but I like the idea, Miss Medene! A chap who can pick himself out of the mire and take the ring to receive ding-dong blows will be at the vertical when the count out comes. You've done me a turn tonight I'll never forget."

"Oh, but . . . I wanted to do something—for him. He did so much for me. I do hope everything will turn out all right."

"Trust me for that," he said, reaching for his panama. "I'll send a car down to Batna to bring Mr. Williams along. I guess you'll be going in now."

"Thanks: the night is very warm. I shall wait until my *fiancé* returns."

"Well, good-night." He put out his rough hand.
"We'll meet again in the morning."

He went off, whistling gaily, and as the big swing doors closed behind him, Saada felt strangely lonely. The night was very still: a handful of stars peeped out and cast a faint glow at the silver disc of the moon dropped behind the trees. In the spacious rooms, now almost deserted save for a few men grouped together playing cards, the lights still burned. But over all was the deep hush of the African night.

The conversation had awakened half-slumbering memories of Williams. Deep down in her heart had lingered the hope that one day they should meet again. It would be good, she felt, to rejoice with him over the success of his splendid effort . . . to see his face glowing with hope instead of lined with despair.

She looked at the watch on her wrist. It was very late—past midnight. How the time had flown: more than three hours since Lance had left her! In the shadow of the slender-stemmed palms encircling the tiny ornamental lake the frogs began to croak, faintly at first but soon producing a babel of sound. Along the yellow streak of the road below the gardens little knots of Arabs passed, the hoods of their *bernouses* drawn about their ears, their robes blown against their thin legs by gusts of wind driving up from the south. One played a flute as he walked . . . a timorous wailing melody full of haunting sadness.

The girl shivered, and drawing her cloak about her, moved down the steps and took the sanded path between the high walls of olive-green foliage. Against the darkness fireflies crossed and recrossed in lines of iridescent flame; the breeze was heavy with the perfume of flowers.

Saada's mind was full of troubrous disquiet. Lance had been long gone: the manner of his going was something unpleasantly new. A month ago he would scarcely have left her for an hour . . . but tonight he had gone off seemingly without regret. Each day, of late, had added its little quota of uneasiness. More than once the friends he had made had covertly shown their disapproval of his choice; tonight Featherstone's manner had been almost without restraint. What would happen later, when the irrevocable step had been taken, and she was his wife? She dared not trust herself to reflect. The clock in the vestibule chimed the half-hour; she turned her back on the gardens and slowly mounted the stairs. To her surprise a light burned brightly in her father's room . . . not the subdued light which usually marked his sleeping hours, but the brilliance of a reading lamp streaming from the partly open door. She knocked very quietly, and to her astonishment the sheikh himself raised the curtain.

“Dearest, you should have been asleep hours ago,” she remonstrated. “And you have been writing, too,” glancing at the pen in his hand. “Do you know what the time is? Nearly one o'clock.”

"I have been engaged on a matter of importance." He interposed his frail body between her and the writing-table, and she noticed that the fingers which swiftly gathered up the sheets and locked them in a drawer were trembling. "But come in and stay a little while before you go to bed. Child, you look tired and distressed."

"No, father. I feel a little anxious about Lance, that is all. He went down to the town about nine o'clock with a number of friends. It is very late, and you know how unsafe some of the roads are at such an hour."

The sheikh swung round, eyeing her sympathetically.

"I see; you have not forgotten your own unpleasant experience. But believe me, there is no danger where a man is concerned. Lance is quite capable of looking after himself . . . I am rather surprised he should have left you alone. Why did you not go with him?"

"It is a man's club. He has gone to play billiards."

His long fingers drummed on the glass-topped table.

"I was thinking rather of the principle. It is not for me to interfere, but I do not approve of a woman so near to becoming a bride being left alone. These English are strange men; have you noticed a coldness in their manner towards you?"

Absolute frankness had always existed from childhood between Saada and her parent. She

answered without the slightest suggestion of bitterness, yet not without a touch of regret.

“I am almost beginning to doubt the wisdom of my decision. I love Lance, father, very dearly indeed, but all along I have feared that being of different race, of different blood, he will suffer for marrying me.”

Sheikh Medene drew the folds of his loose silk robe about him and leaned back in the long chair, his fingers making an apex above his knees.

“You have noticed the coldness and suspicion with which the *rhoumis* regard us?” he repeated.

“One cannot help noticing it, father. In the streets, the public places, we are objects of silent contempt. For myself I care little: I think only of him.”

“You mean . . . when you are married there may be a drifting apart?”

“I can’t see anything else,” she replied. “I wouldn’t for worlds let him know I am hurt because his friend’s invitation was deliberately framed to exclude me. I told him to go and enjoy himself. He does not think he left me with an aching heart.”

“And yet you love him, Saada?” There was a note of interrogation in the gentle voice. “You feel you can find happiness with him?”

“While I was in England I owed to him all the happiness I ever knew. He stood between me and the scorn of his own people. For that I admired him: in time my admiration changed to love . . . at least,” her words coming in a breathless whisper,

"I suppose it is love when you agree to surrender yourself to a man."

Medene ran his fingers thoughtfully through his thin grey beard.

"I have always looked upon Railsford as a noble character, Saada. It struck me very much when I heard of your engagement, because the white man who binds himself to a woman of the East takes a great responsibility. I will not admit—I have never admitted—that the best of our people are inferior to the European; but I have lived long enough to understand the prejudice of the white for the coloured races. I had hoped, dear child," his voice becoming tender. "that Lance cared enough to put you before anything; instead, I fear he will allow blood prejudice to raise a barrier between you."

Saada turned a regretful look on her father's troubled face.

"That's just what I feel, dear. I had expected to be so happy. There is nothing in the world I wouldn't do for Lance. But I know if he ever feels ashamed of me I shall be miserable. In the European quarter, French, English, Maltese, and Sicilians step aside for me to pass . . . when we are together; but in their hearts they despise me. And those of our own race . . . oh, you know what it is, father! They look with scornful eyes and say with contempt, 'There goes one of our own blood who would defile both herself and us by marriage with a dog of an Infidel.' In England

these things bothered me in a vague indefinite sort of way; out here they are a living force. Tonight I sat alone in the garden. I asked myself what to do for the best . . . whether to give Lance up or to go on in the hope of making him happy."

"You believe, my dear one, he really cares for you?"

"I do! I do!" clasping her small hands together. "That is what hurts me so—to think of giving him up after all he has done for me. No," with a hopeless little quiver trembling her lips, "I must go on and trust that when we are married all will be well."

Sheikh Medene rose, and moving towards her, rested the tips of his fingers lightly on her shoulder.

"Believe me, all will go well, my beloved," he said. "For long I have fought a great battle in my heart, and my love for you, greater than love of myself, has won. Tonight I would reveal a lifelong secret to set the seal of happiness upon your future. By my confession I sweep all difficulties away. Saada, the truth no longer shall be hidden from thee: thou art no child of mine, but flesh and blood of an English father and an English mother."

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET OF LONG-DEAD YEARS

ASENSE of unreality seized upon Saada; everything was disproportionate; her father's voice a faint echo that seemed to come from a very long way off. The lights were fading to an all engulfing darkness; the floor began to slip beneath her; she felt herself falling—falling from a great height into the darkness of oblivion.

The experience was transitory; when she had passed her hands across her eyes the room and the lights came back; she still sat in the same chair, and Sheikh Medene himself, no longer unreal and phantasmal, was bending over her, his lined face full of solicitude.

“Dear, I should have prepared you,” he said, tenderly caressing her dead cold hands. “The shock has been too great. And yet—I cannot keep back the truth any longer. It is Allah’s will that I lose you . . . forfeit for ever the love and respect you have always given me. Saada, beloved, no longer my child, but ruler of my happiness . . . I bow myself in sorrow at your feet to crave forgiveness.”

“Dear, there is nothing to forgive!” she an-

swered, clinging to him with her arms about his bowed shoulders. "I have always belonged to you, O my father. This news cannot be true. There must be a mistake. I do not wish to be different. I want only to belong to you. Tell me," lifting her lips to his cheek, "why have you said this? To lift me up in the eyes of my lover; to make me happy? Indeed, I can never know happiness apart from you, my dear one. You have been both my father and my mother."

"Yet indeed am I neither," he answered, averting his gaze. "Behold in me merely Sheikh Ibrahim Ben Medene, lord of Sidi Ochfar, no more than friend to your father and mother, whose souls rest in Paradise. See," glancing at the clock on the writing-table, "the hour grows late, and already you have endured much suffering of mind and body. Sleep now, my little one, and in peace. At sunrise we will meet again—here in this room—and then the veil of mystery shall be lifted, and all beyond made plain."

Saada shook her head.

"I could not sleep, dear. I am too unsettled. You must tell me now. Tomorrow, perhaps—who knows—it may be too late."

The aged Arab moved towards the table and gathered up the closely-written sheets. He spoke with his face turned to the wall.

"At any hour now the will of Allah may be done. I feel the time of passing very near. My trembling feet are being drawn to the golden gates, be-

yond which stretches the Infinite in which I shall have my part. May the Great and Wise One who controls the destinies of weak and evil men give me courage to endure this my heart's affliction. With my eyes towards Mecca and with a sincere heart I offer this prayer to Allah who is God, the one God."

He raised his hands to his forehead, touched each ear with his thumb, and keeping his palms outward, he said, "Allah is great!" After which, with his right hand resting on the left, "Holiness to thee, O Lord. Praise to Thee. Greatness is Thy Name."

The thin, careworn body bent forward; with his head lowered and his fingers touching his knees, he went on, "I extol the sanctity of Allah."

Saada watched in awed silence the conclusion of the prayer. The old man touched the floor with his brow, and she heard the throbbing whisper, "I extol the greatness of the Lord, the Most High," and the last triumphant pronouncement as with the finger of his right hand raised, he cried, "I affirm by the grace within me, there is no God but one God, that Mahommet is his Prophet."

The prayer finished, he turned and handed the girl the papers.

"I have made my peace with the Most High. Now must I make my peace with thee, O daughter of goodness and great charity. Here is the confession which shall stand for ever as a record between me and thy people."

Tremblingly Saada's grip closed upon the document. From weakness the old man was shaking, so she heaped a pile of cushions on the floor and made him sit down. He sat cross-legged at her feet, and with streaming eyes looked up into her face.

"Wilt thou love me when thou knowest all?" he asked in a quavering whisper.

Her soft fingers lovingly touched the lines of care on his forehead.

"Always I shall love thee, my father. I will not read the words thou hast written. From thy lips the truth shall come. Neither barriers of race nor colour can ever divide us."

The assurance calmed him. He clasped his hands in the loose folds of his robe and said in a more calm voice,

"This is the story of Ibrahim Ben Medene, told with the lips of penitence to Marcella, child of Charles and Esther Denton, of Carrisfort, England. It was at the end of the great feast of Ramadan five and twenty years ago that Allah, of his infinite wisdom, brought into my lonely life your father and your mother. Your father was a great scholar whose heart was given to the study of Eastern languages and traditions. He came to Tunis a poor gentleman, to seek my aid in translating the original of the Koran. For six years we worked together until his death. The work was not quite finished. I completed it, and sent it to England. Payment was never made. Your mother did not

know. She was without means: without a piastre in the world. So I made payment to her, letting her believe the money came from England. Six months after your father's death you were born . . . in my house. For long your mother lay ill . . . so ill that at length, on the advice of an Arab physician, I had you both taken to my palace across the desert in the region of El Sid. There it seemed as though she would recover . . . and for two years we lived there happily. Oh, hear me, child, and if it is in the goodness of your heart—forgive. Ibrahim Medene, the lonely Arab sheikh, had learned to love the poor white lady."

"You loved my mother?" Saada muttered.

He bowed his grey head.

"Indeed, with my whole heart. But she never knew. For the honour of him who was dead I kept the knowledge sealed in my bosom. At her passing I gave all my love and devotion to you—flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood . . . and I brought you up as my own child."

Saada drew a long deep breath of amaze.

"I have always looked upon myself as an Arab girl."

The sheikh crossed his hands upon his bosom.

"Therein lies my wrong to you. So great was my love, I could not let you go. Your parents had both told me that all their people in England were dead. They had no relatives. Could I send you back to your native land without friends, without man or woman to lavish love and care upon you?

I could not do it. And yet I dared not keep you without the consent of the British authorities. So I bound all the servants of my house to secrecy and told them that henceforth the world was to regard you as my own child. I gave you the name of Saada, which means Happiness, because since your birth, happiness had come to me."

"And yet my real name is Marcella?"

"Marcella is the name your mother would have given you, had there been a Christian imâm near to give you baptism. The years passed . . . such happy years . . . until you were ten. The thought came to me one day to take you back to Tunis, and surrender you to the care of your own country-women. But I found that your birth was forgotten . . . your father and mother no longer in remembrance. I yielded once more to the temptation to keep you for my own . . . to bring you up to womanhood as my own child. Saada, beloved, are the wells of compassion still deep enough to forgive the one who has wronged you?"

Her hand reached out and touched his bowed head.

"Indeed, there is nothing for me to forgive, my dear father. You have always been so good to me."

He went on, after a little silence,

"In a little while it became necessary to broaden your education. Having once taken the step in wrong, there was no going back. I feared the consequences of my sin, and the risk of losing you . . . the greatest treasure left in my solitary life.

I sent you to Paris to be educated; later to England, where your happy girlhood years were passed. There is little more to tell; when misfortune came upon me and my means failed, you did a noble thing in seeking to support yourself. I lived alone in my house in Tunis, striving to amass money so that when the hand of death took me I could leave some recompense for my wrong."

"I do not want money, I am content so long as I have you," she said, clinging to him and crying quietly.

"Then came the great glad news of your return to Africa. I meant to tell you then. I found you quite happy. The truth would never have been revealed—for in my heart I was a great coward. Then I began to understand your supposed Arab parentage had begun to raise a barrier between you and your future husband's people. I have seen the clouds gathering. Tonight I prayed to Allah that my resolution should not fail. I sat down in this room, alone, to write the story of your birth and upbringing. By the hope of Paradise within me, all this is the truth."

She lowered her head and pressed her lips upon his brow. Their hands met and for a time no word passed between them. In the silence he read the compassion in her soul, and the dawn of hope began to break upon the darkness.

"So at your hands I find mercy?" he said in a quavering whisper.

She held the frail body fast.

“More than mercy—love, my great love for you. The sun has shone through many days that might have been dark for me: tomorrow it will shine again for you.”

She knew that the picturesque Eastern imagery would please him. A smile irradiated the worn features.

“May the past never press heavily upon the present or the future,” he said. “We will look together to the break of a brighter, better day. The truth will help disperse the clouds that have gathered, and will give joy to the man who will wed you.”

“Yes, I am certain Lance will be pleased,” she agreed. “Not that it will make much difference, in one way, to him. I believe he loves me for myself alone. His mother, however, does not think or feel the same. We get on very well together, but she has never lost sight of the fact that I was Arab born.”

“And now you will be able to tell her . . . that you, even as she is, are of pure English blood,” the sheikh said with childish simplicity.

“Yes, of English blood,” she repeated thoughtfully. “You say my father’s name was Denton and that he came from a place called Carrisfort?”

“Charles Denton, of Carrisfort, in Devonshire. It is, I believe, only a small place—what you call a village. Once, there were many Dentons there, and they lived in a large house. But with the passing of time the family fortunes decayed; your

grandfather was the imâm—clergyman you call him—of that place, and this Charles was his only son. He went as a boy to a famous school, and later to the University of Oxford, to Christ's College, I believe. As a young man he drifted East—to Cairo—to study languages there, and met your mother. She, I believe, was the daughter of an English officer killed in the Egyptian war. Often I have heard them say that they two were alone in the world. When they had gone there was no one but me to care for you."

"I shall never forget," she said, regarding him fondly. "You have given me all I could desire: the shelter of your home, education, your love. Oh, I cannot pretend I am not happy at the news! Always I have loved England and the English people. Now I know that I am one of them I am glad because of the joy it will bring to Lance."

The sheikh raised his head.

"It is very late . . . the clock shows the hour of two."

"I fancy I hear him coming. Yes," as the gravel crunched under the window, "that is Lance's step. I am glad he is safely home."

The sheikh rose and pointed to the papers.

"You will lock them away and keep them in safe keeping. Later, I have a few other things to give you . . . your mother's rings and a seal that was your father's. I hear the closing of the door. You will go to Lance and break the good news to him?"

She pursed her lips suddenly and shook her head in firm decision.

"No, I shall not tell him, father, until we are man and wife. He will marry me for myself alone. This shall be my wedding surprise for my husband. Not a living soul, save you and I—not even dear old Yakoub—shall share it until I am married. Don't you see how much happier I shall always be . . . knowing that Lance made me his wife because he loved me—in spite of race, colour, or the opinions of his friends? And if ever I am tempted to feel bitter against those who turned their backs on me . . . I shall always have the thought to treasure . . . that my husband stood by me through everything."

A slow, perplexed smile lit the old man's face.

"It is difficult to understand the heart of a woman," he said, patting her shoulder affectionately. "I find it almost impossible to realize that you bear me no ill will for keeping the secret so long. I feared so much, child, to lose you. But now I know——"

"You will never lose me. You are still my father—I shall so think of you always. The love you have shown me will never be forgotten. I—I am very happy."

She stood in the middle of the room, her soft brown arms resting on his shoulders, her fingers interlocked behind his bowed head. Upstairs a door closed quietly. Railsford had retired, little dreaming of the scene being enacted below.

Saada felt far too excited to sleep. She wanted to run away—to a spot where she could be quite alone—to muse over this strange turn of fortune's wheel. To rejoice in the new-found knowledge was no disrespect to the aged man whom she had always looked upon as her father; she knew now why, through the long years passed under northern skies, all her instincts and feelings had been so purely English. The blood that ran in her veins was stronger even than the influence of an early Eastern upbringing.

"You must sleep," she said, kissing the sheikh's forehead. "I will take great care of the papers; do not be afraid I shall lose them."

"There are others," he told her, walking at her side, his flat heelless shoes making no sound in the thick pile of the carpet. "Your parents' marriage certificate, the few pieces of jewellery and a packet of letters. Good-night, my dear one."

"Good-night, my father," she answered.

The door closed behind the frail old man; she passed out into the deserted vestibule and stole like a shadow into the dark of the sleeping gardens. Among the bushes a few cicadas shrilled and fireflies made fancy play of flame and colour against the sapphire curtain of night. The light in Lance's bedroom snapped out, and was followed a few minutes later by the sheikh's. She felt no sense of isolation; rather a tense exhilaration filled her at the thought of the secret which the last few hours had given into her keeping. Looking into the

future—but a little while since clouded by depressing uncertainties—she saw only care-free years . . . the great barrier of blood at last broken down. For Lance's sake she felt more pleased than for her own; the sweeping away of difficulties that might have proved a real burden to him no longer existed.

She walked rapidly, her step as light as her heart. Life had suddenly become a song—of thankfulness and hope. She could look to the future now with unshadowed eyes; the gloom had passed and before her lay the dawn of love and happiness.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CABLEGRAM

ON the following Thursday morning the wedding took place in the little Protestant church behind the native quarter. There was very little fuss or ceremony, save for the special decoration of the somewhat plain interior with a wealth of blooms provided by the sheikh. Only a few friends were present. The English clergyman, who served a large district lying between the frontiers of the two countries, travelled up by car from Abd-el-Hamada to perform the ceremony, after which Saada and her husband drove back to the hotel.

Outwardly she was very calm, her beautiful face wreathed with happy smiles, but in her heart was the excited longing to break the wonderful secret.

On the verandah Monsieur Gourron, the proprietor, greeted them with a well-prepared little speech in which on behalf of himself and his entire staff he wished them a long and happy married life. Then he presented an immense bouquet, after which he asked the acceptance of a gift especially sent down by the works' inspector of the company.

Amid a general chorus of congratulations, led

by Mr. Snitch and his daughter, they went to the private room, where a luncheon had been prepared, and Yakoub entered carrying a tray heaped with telegrams.

Lance took them and moved towards Saada, surrounded by her guests.

“We will share them between us, dear,” he said lightly, as he handed a batch to her. “My first is from General Bailey, who wires from Sfax. Here, this should have been opened by you—from your friend John Williams”—smiling good-naturedly. “Goodness knows how the news could have reached Batna . . . anyway, what he says is very nice and very appropriate.”

Saada blushed as she read the message.

“With all my heart I wish you and your husband every joy and blessing.—JOHN WILLIAMS.”

She turned and handed the slip to Theodore Snitch, who was chatting gaily to the sheikh.

“He can’t have received your letter, or he would certainly have come,” she said lightly. “I’m rather anxious to know whether he will secure the appointment.”

The millionaire laughed.

“My dear lady, you need have no fears. After all you have told me, backed by your husband’s recommendation, John Williams is my man. Don’t you think, Mr. Railsford,” moving over to where Lance stood exchanging laughing pleasantries with

Yakoub, "it's up to us to do all we can for a fellow who's trying to stand on his own feet?"

The conversation drifted to a confused hum in Saada's ears. The interest for a moment had shifted to Theodore Snitch and her husband. Even the sheikh was taking part in it. Her eyes were riveted on the last telegram she had opened. Unlike Lance, who, as each came up for scrutiny, tore the covering hastily, she had merely lifted the lightly-gummed flap and withdrawn the slip of flimsy white paper. The cablegram was intended for her husband; the fact was indicated in every word of the message: still she read it to the end.

"Postpone wedding at any cost. Your uncle's entire fortune left to you. Say nothing to anybody but return to England alone immediately.—MOTHER."

Saada could have laughed aloud at the irony of fate, which by the space of one short hour had robbed Helen Railsford of the power to change her future. She herself had never been insensible to the silent antagonism of this proud, hard woman. Here the same spirit was expressed in terms quite unmistakable . . . the putting off of the marriage, the good fortune to be guarded as a precious secret, the return home of her son, without the woman to whom he had pledged his life and honour.

The hideousness of the suggestion angered rather than hurt her. And yet she could feel little but contempt for this wretched creature whose

venom had been spent in vain. Powerless now was she, or any one, to alter the irrevocable; nothing could change the fact of her marriage.

Mechanically she folded the sheet and put it back in the thin blue envelope. Under the warmth of her fingers the gum set fast. Conscious that some one was speaking to her, yet blind to the meaning of the words, she turned away and picked up a wedding gift which had just been presented. The little throng drifted her way again; through the press she caught a glimpse of her husband's smiling face. He bent towards her and took the little sheaf of unopened telegrams from her nerveless clasp.

"I'll help read yours," he said. "There's such a funny one from the two American people we met in Tunis."

Saada looked up, her brain trying to frame an excuse to keep him from reading the telegrams. The effort failed.

"Which Americans?" she said almost stupidly. "Did we ever meet any in Tunis?"

Railsford laughed boisterously.

"Of course you remember . . . the pretty little dark woman who astounded us by introducing Hamon K. Spargo as her fourth husband . . . the other three having been divorced by her in different States for trivial incompatibilities of temper. Don't you recollect saying you hoped she wouldn't get rid of Spargo on the ground of too easy compliance with her wishes? Now I wonder who this

one is from." A moment's tense pause, then, "Saada . . . I've got . . . bad news from home."

The glance she directed at him as he reread his mother's message was curiously calm. Yet behind it lurked a dread more poignant than she had ever known.

"What is wrong, Lance?" she asked quietly.

A hush had fallen on the company. Railsford winced under the directness of his young wife's look, and with slow deliberation placed the folded cablegram in his pocket.

"A message has come through from some one at Redlands to say mother is dangerously ill. I'm afraid there's nothing for it but to leave at once."

Saada stood motionless, impassive, under the shock of her husband's falsehood, her face as waxen as the flowers with which she was surrounded. She felt cold. She tried to speak. Her head drooped and for a moment she gave no sign that she fully understood.

The wave of weakness passed: questions and commiseration poured in on Railsford from every side; he met them with a smile of assumed gratitude, and, moving to his wife, took her hand in his.

"I'm ever so sorry, little sweetheart," he whispered. "I would have given worlds to save you this on our wedding-day. But you realize, don't you? . . . I must go."

She could not trust herself to look at him yet. Her voice came in a lifeless whisper,

"Of course if your mother is dangerously ill . . .

your place is with her. A son's first duty is to his mother."

"You feel that, don't you?" he said self-exclusively. "It is terrible to have to leave you . . . on our wedding-day, too—but I feel I ought to go."

"Yes, you ought to go," she admitted mechanically. "I quite understand."

Sheikh Medene turned from one to the other in amazement.

"You mean . . . you will be returning to England—without Saada?"

Lance drew him aside.

"I don't see what else can be done. It is a long and expensive journey; and, as you know, my means are small. Besides, why harrow her with what must, after all, be only a very distressing affair? She is best out of it . . . to stay here alone with you until I return. Of course, I shall hope for the best, and I shall get back with all possible speed. Yakoub"—the servant hustled forward—"will you inquire of the company's agent how soon a car can be here to take me to Biskra? By driving through the night I may be able to catch tomorrow's train. Saada, I hope you're not very upset?"

Her voice was slightly hysterical.

"I—I don't know what to say, Lance. It has happened . . . so suddenly. I had no idea your mother was ill."

"Nor had I," he admitted. "In her last letter to me she spoke of being quite well, and of returning

to El Bouira as soon as my uncle was convalescent. I suppose, though, the strain of nursing him has proved too much. She was never over-strong."

Saada knew that all the time he was fighting out in the depths of his warped nature the conflict between his shallow passion for her and the cupidity which his mother's news had aroused. And, all along the line, his ignoble self was winning. Just as clearly might those lips which had so cruelly tried to deceive her be saying, "I am sorry now that I married you. You are alien to me, by blood and race. I have been suddenly given great riches. I go back to a position of wealth and honour. My people would scorn me were I to return with an Arab bride. It is best you should never know the true reason for my going."

And then from sheer weariness she tried to believe she was deceiving herself and wronging him too. In a little while, when the first wave of selfishness had passed, he would think of her, and his love would return. Now he was being carried away by the force of his mother's influence; in time the full realization of his cruelty would bring remorse.

"You must go," she said in a voiceless whisper. "Lose no time. Yakoub will help you pack."

"And you?"

"I shall be all right," she answered. "I have still—my father."

She had not forgotten the secret which her heart held. It lay behind her, a useless, dead thing. Of

course she could tell him, and that might alter everything. In that moment of wild, unreasoning conflict her pride won and sealed her lips to silence. The man who had cast her away should never know the full extent of his wrongdoing.

One by one the few guests, after a word or two of sympathy, had slipped away. Many of the things Lance required for the journey were at the villa. To get off before the horror of his deception could cause his resolution to waver was the one thought that obsessed him.

As the big car drove up the sanded drive he hustled into the room where Saada was with her father. He looked pale and worried as he set down the two hand cases.

"Try to bear up bravely, my wife," he said. "I know the blow is terrible. But in a little while everything will come right. I shall write to you from Tunis, and again from Marseille; and from England I will send a full account of everything. Good-bye, sheikh . . . and good-bye, Saada."

He took her cold, inanimate form in his arms; there was no warmth or compassion in the touch of his lips; with eyes closed, she swayed unsteadily when he released her . . . her glance followed him to the door, and as he passed from her sight, the light of day snapped out and she drifted away on the untroubled waters of oblivion.

Was it the blinding whiteness of the rough sandy road that prompted Lance to close in the car long before the streets of El Bouira were left behind?

He leaned back, breathless from the tense nerve-strain of the last half-hour, and shut his eyes to keep out the vision of Saada's face as he had last looked upon it . . . the face of a woman horror-stricken.

He writhed in a torment of heart-searching uneasiness; the stifling heat brought tiny rivulets of moisture from his forehead to the corners of his lips. Under the first tempestuous rush of temptation it had been easy to tell the lie which his mother's news had prompted; but now, with wave upon wave of compunction and remorse beating in and dashing to pieces the foundations on which the falsehood had been built, he began to feel incapable of sustaining the *rôle* he had adopted. Terror seized him: the horror of an act so cruel that his soul revolted against the consequences. In a nightmare of gloom he reached the villa which was to have been his home.

The rooms echoed dully to his tread; the labour of loving hands mocked him for his perfidy. He passed, a pitiful object, into the sleeping apartment prepared for his and Saada's homecoming. Through the open window the desert wind blew softly, but fevered rather than cooled the burning in his veins. The cloying perfume of the flowers sickened him; the gentle tapping of the star-like clusters of purple bougainvillea against the jalousie blinds set his nerves jangling. He was conscious of a moral cowardice as deep as his obliquity. He

possessed neither the courage to turn back to plead forgiveness nor to go on in his self-chosen path. Three times he packed and unpacked the large suitcase, littering the things which Saada's hands had so carefully arranged, in a disordered mess around him. In despair he took the cablegram from his pocket and read it again. Behind every word lurked the clearness of his mother's purpose. She might have said, "You are now an immensely rich man with a high position to maintain. To have as your wife a woman of colour must be fatal bar to the position you will take up. Make any excuse to get away from her—to free yourself. Come back to England untrammelled, and keep your good fortune, for the present, a secret." He had understood all she meant to convey, and in understanding had acquired resolution. For a time the lure of money had hypnotized him, but now the effect was wearing off. He looked about him in helpless indecision, one moment torn with restless longing to repair the evil and to seek again his happiness with Saada; the next, spurred on to keep his fatal course, by sheer dread of the consequences of his action.

To go back must be to confess his wrong. He could not do that.

To keep on . . . perhaps time would show a middle course in which Saada could take her part. Thank God she knew nothing of what had prompted him to this!

A heavy step in the hall below caused him to start guiltily. He heard the chauffeur's voice calling from the foot of the stairs.

"If monsieur would catch the train he must hurry."

"Coming, François, coming!" he answered, and marvelled at the weakness of his voice. He made an effort to control himself, and tossed the clothes into the case again. He skirted the bed and Saada's dressing-table on which were displayed the set of gold-mounted tortoiseshell brushes which had formed his wedding-present, and groped a blind way to the door. He half wished that she would come, and by a look, a word, or gesture of reproach break his resolution. At the open door to the cosy smoke-room, on the table of which lay the gold and silver damascened dagger bought in the native quarter of Constantine, he sharply averted his gaze, and handing the luggage to François moved to the car.

"We can have the covering down now," he muttered, his glance passing over the lonely waste of sand gleaming like burnished gold under the eye of the sun. "There is more wind than in the streets. Drive as fast as you can to make up time."

The cigar which he had lighted seemed to soothe his nerves; he settled himself comfortably and tried to review the situation with sober reasoning. Of course Saada would feel the shock of his going.

Time, however, would soften the blow, and long

before he reached England she would have become accustomed to the changed conditions. Not that he meant to leave her always; in spite of his mother's wishes, Saada was still his wife, and must find some place in his life. Perhaps, being now a rich man, he could so arrange matters that it would be possible to spend part of the year on his estate—the message clearly indicated that the property had been left absolutely to him—and the rest of the time in North Africa. One point, however, emerged quite clearly—it would be suicidal to think of bringing her back to England. The treatment already experienced in El Bouira had shown him the folly of such a course.

There was his work, ruthlessly abandoned in the moment of good fortune. Strange he hadn't thought of that—to go to the office and settle up his affairs. Yet not strange, considering the smallness of the position. He smiled derisively. If Uncle Hugh had cut up for anything like the amount he was reputed to possess, the income could not possibly fall far short of thirty thousand.

The desert, as it spun past, became a sea of gold, the rivulets breaking free of the cool oases, rivers of crystal that trailed away until the blue distance swallowed them up. In an hour the unexpected had happened, and he was rich for life. Admitted, he had made one false step by marrying Saada; but even that was a step not altogether regretted. There was a deal of love for her still in his heart;

he believed it possible to find more than a meed of happiness with her when time should have given him the chance to make more settled arrangements.

He was glad now he had not shown her the telegram. Naturally, as his wife, she would have felt her place was at his side. But it is one thing for a poor man to live in comparative obscurity with a woman of Eastern blood; quite another for a man of great wealth and important social position. In that respect his mother was right, though secretly he could not approve of the method employed to put her principle into practice. Had he been left to his own devices he would have made an effort to compromise with Saada, have pointed out the difficulties in which his new responsibilities placed him, and have suggested some reasonable halfway ground on which each could stand without detriment to the other.

So his mind and heart played the coward's part of shifting the burden, of temporizing with truth, of blinding conscience to the glaring iniquity of the fault.

He reached Biskra at a late hour, yet in time to visit the official representative there, to explain matters and to communicate by cable with the Foreign Office in London. Having made the drastic cleavage, something of his customary confidence returned. By François he sent back to Saada a long letter, full of tender solicitude and regret for the unavoidable parting. It was but a more thoughtful elaboration of his brief farewell, so sincere on

the surface that it swept away the aggravating twinges of remorse. To this deliberate lulling of his own conscience he devoted himself assiduously, all through the long journey home . . . telling himself again and again that some way would open up whereby Saada might be accorded both justice and consideration.

From Marseille he had wired to his mother the time of his arrival. As the train drew into Victoria through the dark fog of a cold November afternoon, he caught sight of her, eagerly scanning the long line of carriages. She waved to him, and as he alighted, looked with supreme satisfaction on his sun-burned face. What pleased her more, however, was the fact of his being alone.

“It is ever so good to see you again, Lance,” she said, kissing him with more than usual warmth. “It seems years since we parted in Constantine, and so much has happened since.”

He forced a smile and fell in at her side as the press closed round them.

“Yes, a great deal has happened,” he admitted, wondering how best to break the news which troubled him. “And you are certainly looking well.”

Helen Railsford laughed complacently.

“My dear boy, I’ve never been better in my life. Uncle Hugh’s death was a real godsend. It has given me quite a new lease of life. What about your luggage, dear?”

“I’ve only these two cases,” he answered. “I

travelled on a brush and comb and pair of pajamas. Now what are we going to do?"

"Well, I thought we might stay tonight at the Grosvenor, put in tomorrow with the lawyers, so that you will know just how matters stand, and go down to the country by motor on Thursday. I had the best of Uncle Hugh's cars brought up to town . . . in fact, I myself use it—Mr. Strange-ways raised no objection."

Lance merely smiled, faintly amused by the thoroughness with which his mother had grasped the new situation.

"Well, I suppose this good news is really true?" he ventured, as the taxi purred out of the station yard.

Helen Railsford beamed.

"I was never so surprised in my life, Lance. I arrived only ten days before your uncle passed away. I think he must have endured a great deal. However, doubtless the suffering softened him. He was always a hard man, as you know. But towards the last he came round to a right way of thinking, and admitted he had never treated me as a brother should. I told him I had never borne him the slightest ill-will: that was scarcely true; still, it sufficed. Two days before he died . . . I had talked a lot about you when I found his thoughts centred in your direction . . . he made a fresh will and settled two thousand a year on me for life: the residue is yours absolutely."

The young man drew a deep sigh of content.

"And the residue, mother?"

"Well, there is a good deal of property in London. I was talking to Mr. Strangeways about it yesterday. It produces something like nine or ten thousand a year. Then, of course, there is Landrigham . . . the estate is very large—one of the biggest in Norfolk, with seven or eight outlying farms. Altogether Mr. Strangeways thinks you can look to a regular twenty-three thousand from that source."

Railsford looked pleased.

"I had reckoned about thirty thousand a year altogether. Good Lord!" laughing silently. "What a windfall for a fellow who's been used to grubbing along on a Government pittance."

The cab was stopping. Helen Railsford rose and laid her hand on his sleeve.

"I told you, years ago, it might come at any time. That was why I was so dead against your engagement with Saada. By the by, how did you leave her?"

"Oh, Saada is very well, thanks," he replied, colouring. "Naturally, my coming away so suddenly surprised her. We'll talk about it later."

They plunged into the bustle at the hotel entrance and the lift carried them to the private suite which Mrs. Railsford had engaged.

"I thought you'd prefer a quiet dinner with me to the noise of the dining-room," she said, removing her hat and coat. "Now let me look at you

and see how the desert has treated you. Of course you're very brown, and you look wonderfully well. But I don't suppose you'll want to go back again."

Lance had halted by the long window, and his troubled gaze took in the ebb and flow of traffic and street life only vaguely discernible through the dense, clammy mist.

"I don't know," he said gravely. "I suppose I shall often long for the sun, the pure desert air, the colour of an African town. In a very little time it got hold of me: I didn't realize how much until I landed in France, and saw dark forests and dreary expanses swept by rain. Yes, this is splendid," as his mother preceded him into the private sitting-room, where covers had been set for two. "I'm not altogether sorry to be in England again."

They talked commonplaces over the meal until the waiter left and they were able to retire to their sitting-room. The confession which Lance had to make weighed so heavily on his mind that he relapsed into a moody silence, till Mrs. Railsford remarked,

"I was never so relieved in my life as when the news of Hugh's illness brought me home. I simply loathed the thought of an intimate association with those dreadful Arab people. What occurred? Did you get Saada's father to join you before you left Constantine?"

Lance inclined his head.

"There was nothing else to do. I couldn't have travelled all that way across the desert with Saada

alone. So we sent to the sheikh in Tunis and asked him to join us."

Mrs. Railsford drew a chair to the fire and poked the logs into a crackling blaze. Then she leaned back, her fingers clasped in her lap.

"The sheikh is all right, a very nice old man, so far as Arabs go, but I can't think how you managed to exist with him all those weeks in an hotel. Did he eat *cous-cous* and dip his fingers into the dish? That is what most of them do."

Lance was looking vainly for a loophole or for something to ease the situation.

"No, mother, I was agreeably surprised. I found the old fellow most perfectly mannered. You see, he spent a great deal of time in Western Europe in his younger days, principally in Paris. And among his own people he is most highly honoured. I never before realized how cultured a well-born aristocratic Arab could be. In El Bouira the natives thought a great deal of him . . . more, in fact, than most people thought of me."

"Naturally so." She lifted her hand to give emphasis to the argument. "Nobody, native or European, thinks anything of a white man engaged to a black woman. The French and English cold-shoulder you; the Orientals regard you as beneath contempt. And here at home the situation would have been a hundred times worse. Just think: you, the head of a great house, a wealthy land-owner, with a position to maintain in the country . . . it would have been terrible had you not taken

the situation in time. That is why I wired as I did; the moment the breath was out of your uncle's body I sent that message telling you what to do. You must have managed very well or you wouldn't be here now. But you haven't yet told me how you got over the difficulty."

He leaned forward.

"I didn't get over it—as I should like to have done," he said in a troubled whisper. "Saada and I were married an hour before your cable arrived."

CHAPTER XIV

THE SALE OF A WOMAN'S HEART

HELEN RAILSFORD sat huddled in her chair, a flabby, inert figure, incapable of speech. There are some shocks so great that they stun physically as well as mentally, leaving the body as powerless as the tongue to respond to the blow beneath which it is labouring. This was one of them. In a moment her son's bald statement banished the illusions of weeks. She had schemed and planned and built fairy castles in the air from the time when grave-faced Mr. Strangeways, standing in the middle of the great library, had calmly read out the all-important clause in Hugh Ferraby's will,

“And to my nephew Lance Bertram Railsford I leave the residue of my property absolutely.”

In that moment she had changed into a spinner of dreams. She saw her son a power in the county, a force more powerful than Ferraby with all his money had ever been. Nothing but a miracle could save him from greatness; from the consular service to the diplomatic was but the shortest of steps; to a title, possibly a peerage, a question only of time and arrangement. . . . A union with a daughter of a noble house must come in the inevi-

table order of things. The former glories of a once-powerful name would be restored in the person of her son—all this and more she had seen, and dwelt upon with the passing of the weeks, until the fairy picture had become a living reality. But, with a few breathless jerked-out words, Lance himself had blown the fantasy into the air.

“You . . . you really don’t mean it, Lance?” she managed to get out.

His head drooped over his interlocked hands and he stared moodily into the flames. The fire played tricks of deep shadow and ruddy glow upon the sombre face, and gave the restless woman the impression that his mind was troubled on the same score as her own.

“I do mean it, mother,” he said, with an effort to control himself. “Your cable should have reached me the afternoon before the wedding. It didn’t get to El Bouira until five minutes to seven at night. They kept it back and sent it up with a whole batch the next morning.”

“Then—you—you are really married?”

She pulled herself out of the dazed state and nerved herself to face the shock.

“Actually married, dear. The wedding took place at eleven o’clock in the morning of the sixteenth—as I had written you: I opened your wire two hours later, just when we were ready to sit down to luncheon.”

“Oh, Heaven!” she whispered faintly, holding her jewelled fingers over her eyes. “This is awful!

To think that after all the trouble I took to save you . . . that girl . . . she's a clever, calculating, unscrupulous little fiend. I knew it all along: I told you so before you left England. She schemed for years to catch you—ever since you took her into your office. And now . . . what a fool you were, what an unutterable fool! Don't look at me like that!" banging her hand in fury against her knee. "I mean it. I mean it. You've spoilt your life, and mine too. Nothing but social ruin and degradation await you. Whatever made you do it?"

"I didn't know Uncle Hugh meant to leave me his money," he replied weakly. "If I had—"

"Know! You never know anything," she went on. "Didn't I say, over and over again, he had no one else to leave it to? He hated me . . . as much as I did him . . . and I had the sense to see it. But you—you were different. He had nothing against you. It was as plain as the nose on your face . . . you must be his heir. And in face of that," her voice rising shrilly, "you deliberately chose to throw yourself away on a black woman . . . a nigger. Oh," with a hysterical gasp, "I can't bear it! . . . I simply can't."

"Mother, don't make a scene," he counselled, setting a restraining grip on her shoulder. "Facts must be faced. I'm married to Saada . . . so there's an end of it."

She looked at him with angry eyes.

"I—I was always very fond of her," he continued wearily. "I believe if this hadn't happened I

should have settled down quite happily. Only, when I read your wire, and I realized what the money meant, the temptation came—to cut and run. I—I almost wish I hadn't come home."

The woman's mouth curved in a sneer.

"A lot of use wishing that—now. And if you were so solicitous for my interest in the matter, why didn't you break with her before you left England? What did I say to you that last Sunday at Redlands? I begged and prayed of you to give her up. But you were obstinate, pig-headed. Now see where it has landed you."

"I—I came home," he muttered excusingly.

"You came home all right. And, thank goodness, you left her behind. That, however, doesn't alter the essential fact. You are married . . . and you can't marry again without committing bigamy."

"I've no desire to marry any one . . . even if I could." His manner suggested weariness. "It wasn't easy—to leave her like that."

"Like what?" Helen Railsford showed sudden interest.

He stared moodily into the blaze.

"I had to tell a lot of lies. It wasn't a nice thing to do . . . to a girl like Saada. She always played the game with me. I said you were ill—almost dying, or something of the sort, and on the strength of it . . . I came away."

The figure in the chair straightened.

"Then—she doesn't know—the real reason why

you left? Hadn't you the courage to break with her definitely?"

Her scorn whipped a spot of colour into Railsford's pallid cheeks.

"How could I? She trusted me . . . and it was her wedding-day. Heaven knows, I behaved rottenly enough."

The woman groaned.

"Then the position is—at any moment she may turn up and claim her place—as your wife?"

"Ye-yes. I couldn't prevent it."

A long pause followed, through which two minds were busy, one looking forward, the other back into the past.

Mrs. Railsford slowly recovered her composure.

"There's only one thing to do, Lance—to pension her off. Like all coloured women, she's native at heart . . . which means she has her price. You must get rid of her, either with a lump sum or an allowance. We had better take Strangeways' opinion."

"Thanks"—his tone determined. "I prefer to keep this as much as possible a secret."

"But can you? The marriage is bound to be reported in the little local paper, if there is one, and copies may drift to England."

"I thought of that. Before I left Biskra I gave the chauffeur a letter to take to the editor of the *El Bouira Gazette*. No announcement will appear."

She laughed—a harsh, discordant note that set his nerves jangling again.

"At least you had the sense, then, to see eye to eye with your mother, if you haven't now. I suppose, though, quite a number of people know."

"Oh, lots," he answered drearily. "El Bouira has a considerable European population. I can't make out that I'm not married—if that's what you're thinking."

"I'm thinking only of you," she returned curtly; "of the mess you've got yourself into. However," her thoughts harking back, "it is quite evident we can't hide up the marriage. The next thing to try—is to annul it."

He shook his head.

"How can I? There's no cause. I went into it of my own free will. We were married in the English church."

"Saada is a Mahomedan. Can't you get out on that count?"

"Saada is a professed Christian—a confirmed member of the Church of England."

"I thought—once a Mahomedan always a Mahomedan."

"Sheikh Medene never made any attempt to force his religion on her. She told me . . . almost his last words, when he sent her to Europe, were, 'Over your religious belief I wish to exercise no influence or control. Now that you have come to years of discretion you are free to choose for your-

self.' I was surprised when I found out she had embraced the Christian faith."

"Perhaps it will give her courage to face the trouble she has got herself into," the woman retorted. "The position seems to grow worse. I suppose next you'll be telling me you've arranged for her to follow you to England."

"No. I simply said you were ill and had sent for me. She raised no objection to my coming away."

"Well, what are you going to do?" The plump fingers were extended over the fire to drive out the dead coldness. "She can't appear at Landringham as your wife. The entire county would turn its back. At every turn both you and she—and I, too—would be cold-shouldered. You would be ostracised—an object of contempt and derision."

"I suppose I should." A helpless sigh left him. With a tired gesture he flung the charred end of the cigar into the grate. "Certainly the position looks difficult."

"It's worse than that." Helen Railsford became more decisive. "You would be a pariah, an outcast among your own people. You know the position you will have to occupy in the county—the lord-lieutenancy is almost as certain to come to you as it did to Uncle Hugh. How can a man fill an important public position—with a black wife?"

"It's hardly fair to call Saada black, mother."

She laughed.

"What about these Eurasians who come here married to white men? Don't we regard them as black, though their skins may be as white as yours? And some of them are of high caste, too. Does any one think anything of them, or receive them? Of course not! You can't blend the West with the East. English people won't put up with it."

"It is difficult, I agree," he mumbled.

She regarded him with a look of unveiled contempt.

"That's all you say, 'It is difficult.' Of course it's difficult. You saw that a week ago, when first you left her. But what I want to know is, what you intend doing. You can't go on muttering, 'It's difficult,' and leave her to come here and fasten herself on you. That's what will happen, if you don't stir yourself."

He turned like a baited animal at bay.

"Well, what do you suggest? I'm willing to do anything for the best. I've already taken the plunge by lying to her. Shall I write and say you are still very ill, and it is quite out of the question to leave you, but that when you're well again I'll return to El Bouira? Is there anything in that?"

Mrs. Railsford inclined her head.

"Just about as much as saying, 'I'm chained to England for an indefinite period, so I think you had better come home.' Of course, you know it won't do. I can't imagine what's in the back of your mind. You must break with her . . . so why temporize? You don't want her here."

"Perhaps it is best she shouldn't come."

"Best!" with a sneer. "What sort of a life would it be? No; the course is clear . . . write and say quite plainly your marriage was a mistake; you never wish to see her again, but you are willing, so long as she keeps out of England, to make her an adequate allowance."

Lance shifted uneasily.

"I'd never dreamt of anything—quite so drastic. Isn't there—some milder course? I don't believe money would appeal to Saada. She's not that type of girl."

"Nonsense! Money appeals to every woman—especially an Arab. They worship jewellery and pretty clothes. Give her enough to deck herself out with and she'll never trouble you."

The nerve-strain had brought tiny beads of moisture to Railsford's forehead. He passed his hand across his eyes, and rising unsteadily, moved to the middle of the room. From the street rose the dull roar of innumerable taxicabs. Yet with his mind filled with the girl he had so cruelly deserted, El Bouira did not seem so very far away.

"If only I could be sure of never meeting her I shouldn't mind," he reflected. "Supposing I sent such a letter . . . I wonder . . ."

Mrs. Railsford turned impatiently.

"Why should you bother to write? Leave everything to your lawyers. Tell them you were inveigled into a foolish marriage . . . since you have come away you realize you don't care for her, and

that it will be better for all parties concerned if you go your respective ways. Strangeways can put it much better than you can. He will say you're not disposed to be ungenerous; that, provided she remains in North Africa, and on a receipt of a signed application each month, she will receive an allowance of fifty pounds."

"How much is that? Six hundred a year. It doesn't seem much out of thirty thousand. I believe she could claim more."

"Well, make it a hundred if you like. Twelve hundred a year. I call that most handsome. She wouldn't have had half as much had you stayed at El Bouira."

"Yes, I suppose it would do," he admitted, stroking his chin. "All the same, I very much doubt if she will take it."

"You mean—she won't think it enough?"

"Not that at all. I don't believe money will compensate Saada one little bit. She never cared how much or how little I had."

"Very well, then. Don't send any. Simply say you don't wish to have anything to do with her. In my opinion that is as much as she deserves."

"I must do something," he said with sudden decision. "No, I shan't instruct Strangeways at all. I'll do everything myself. It will have more force coming from me. I'll go down and see the place first, to make quite sure."

"Sure of what?"

"It's worth while breaking her heart."

"At least you seem to understand her."

"I do, and I understand myself too. However, I see your point of view, and tomorrow, if I come round entirely to your way of thinking, I'll do as you suggest."

Lance went down to Landringham in an uncomfortable frame of mind. Impressed though he had been from the first by his unexpected good fortune, he was not finding it easy to cut Saada entirely out of his life. That it must come to this before long he never doubted: it was the cold, calculated brutality of the process which bothered him.

Through the long journey in the luxurious limousine he maintained a stolid silence, seeking one excuse after another to justify his action. Surely Saada, native by instinct and heredity, could find more lasting happiness with her own people. She would be more content under the placid skies of Africa than facing the stress and turmoil of social existence in England. Besides, the position she must have been called upon to occupy, considering the wealth and importance of her husband, would never have been a pleasure to a nature so simple and retiring. Always she must have felt terribly out of place.

And yet to every argument there was an answer which condemned the cause of his reasoning. Saada was his wife by the law of God as well as by the law of man. He had vowed himself to a sacred purpose which already he was anxious to evade.

Not that he had lost all affection for her, but simply that she failed to fit in with the scheme of things. He tried to find satisfaction in inwardly extolling the wisdom of a mother whose practical mind could rise over such minor considerations as the imaginary welfare of others. She had lived life more fully than he had ever done; therefore she must know what was best.

He administered the conscience-lulling sedative in large and frequent doses, and felt annoyed with its failure to produce the desired effect. The end of the silent argument was always the same: Saada was his wife, and his duty was to stand by her.

It needed more than the power of wealth to sway him . . . the effect of something more concrete. He found it in his first glimpse of the house after a lapse of years. He had visited there often enough as a boy, but the impression was rather one of a grand and stately mansion that awed him with its size and splendour.

Now, as the car purred along the winding drive, through spacious parkland dotted with dwarf oaks and aged elms, and showed a glimpse of the long red castellated front with the middle tower standing clear above the surrounding country, he began to experience something of the pride of possession. Presently the west side emerged, perfect in its original grandeur, retaining the central great hall and the end double-storey wings.

Landringham had always been a large house, from the time of its erection in the fourteenth

century, and future generations had added to its greatness.

His eyes kindled as they took in the steep tiled gables of the oldest portion, the exquisite timber-work bleached to its natural colour of silver grey by long exposure to sun, wind, and rain. The high gates of delicate hammered ironwork which enclosed the large forecourt laid out with gardens of formal design were open; he passed through, his face glowing with approval. Above the moat, crossed by a balustraded bridge of carved Tudor stonework, high windows filled with armourial stained glass looked out upon broad stretches of velvet-green turf.

The great house, sleeping through the sunlight of the winter's afternoon, suggested a dignified repose which in his present state he found restful. As the wide door opened he stepped into the central hall, panelled and rafted and mysterious in the higher reaches, with dim changing shadows. A wide staircase with carved oak balustrading ran a zig-zag course from landing to landing, and in every recess stood a motionless figure in armour. Painted faces from the wall—men in ruffles and slashed doublets, buff coats, Oudenarde wigs and bucket boots, bare-throated beautiful women in the dresses of Charles the Second's day—seemed to watch him as he passed. He moved from one room to another, from a paradise of Eastern art to the grave simplicity of Elizabethan living-rooms—and at the end of two hours his inspection of his vast

inheritance was far from finished. Escorted by a silent-footed man-servant, he passed down into the vaults and strong rooms; at a click, lights leapt up and grilled doors were opened, to expose to sight the gold and silver treasures of centuries.

"The plate has all been examined and checked, sir, by the expert Mr. Strangeways brought down," the servant said, adding after a discreet cough, "And he said, sir, that at Christie's it would fetch a hundred thousand pounds."

Lance strove to preserve an outward composure, though his pulses beat rapidly as he touched cases of apostle spoons, Commonwealth cups, and delicate baskets of pierced and filigree work. To the man who had struggled and contrived on a few hundreds a year this was like a dream fancy from the Arabian Nights.

He went to the library alone and stared about him—at the hand-tooled bindings, the statuary and pictures in the dark recesses, the moulded ceiling which had been the life-work of a skilful Jacobean craftsman. The vast state-rooms with their tapestried walls and gilt furniture awed him; he was glad to move into the more livable quarters of the home.

In a small turret-room tea had been set; he found his mother breathless with delight and wonder.

"I had no idea it was so full of treasures," she enthused. "While your uncle lay dying there was little chance to inspect anything. One never knows what servants will say. I think you might

dismiss this lot and leave me to engage fresh ones. The Chinese bedrooms are a dream. What do you think of it all?"

Inwardly his excitement matched hers.

"I am just dazed. It doesn't seem real. I keep comparing everything with the little villa at El Bouira. I wonder what Saada would think of all this."

Helen Railsford frowned.

"For goodness' sake get her out of your mind! We discussed and settled that point long ago: Saada can have no possible part in this. The servants would turn up their noses in disgust and leave; everyone would cold-shoulder you. You must fill the place with your friends: arrange about the shooting—have Mr. Kirby up to see how the covers are. I saw quite a number of birds as we came along."

Lance came out of dark abstraction.

"I believe you are right," he said, turning to the window and staring out over the park bathed in the rose-red glow of the western sun, with a gauze-like curtain of mist rising in the valley. "We must enjoy our inheritance alone. I'd no idea it was so magnificent. Saada would feel horribly out of place here. I shall write as soon as we settle down. . . ."

Helen Railsford eyed him coldly over the gilt rim of her tea-cup.

"My dear boy, whatever is the good of putting off the inevitable? It will be weeks before you can

settle in, and at any moment she may take it into her head to join you. How long do you imagine you can keep your good fortune to yourself? As soon as your uncle's will is proved the papers will publish the amount of it and the most interesting points. Some obliging friend will send out to North Africa . . . and then the fat will be in the fire."

"I don't believe for a moment Saada would come," he said. "She's dreadfully proud, and as soon as she finds out I deceived her—about you, I mean—she'll have no more to do with me."

"At least you'll be saving money, my dear. Have you decided anything . . . about the allowance? I really think twelve hundred a year much too high."

Lance came to the table again and passed his cup a second time.

"I was turning that over on the way down. As I said yesterday, I don't think she would accept anything. And yet—I can't leave her unprovided for. Her father has nothing. He gave pretty well all he had to our home. I think the best plan would be to write to Saada and say the marriage was a mistake: that I've discovered since I came away I don't really care for her, and this being the case, we are better apart. Thanks. No sugar this time. And then—about the allowance—"

"It will take a great deal to keep up a place like this. Besides, you are admitting a liability . . ."

"Which exists, whether I admit it or not," he replied. "No, with regard to that, I shall be saving a great deal of trouble—and possibly Saada a good deal of pain—if I leave Strangeways to deal direct with the sheikh. The money can be paid to him . . . enough to keep them both in comfort . . . and Saada need know nothing about it."

"With this condition, my dear—that no attempt is made to molest you, or make your generosity the basis of bargaining. It should be an unconditional acceptance of a very generous gift. Yes, I believe you are right. Write to Saada tonight—in the manner you suggest . . . and leave the business entirely to the lawyers."

Lance left his mother, and, lighting a cigar, strolled away to the banqueting-hall. Here the servants were already busy, setting covers on the long refectory tables, and the high silver candelabra were being brought in. He wanted to be alone, and sought once more the quiet of the library. He lit a couple of candles, for the short winter day was fast drawing in, and seating himself before his uncle's desk, he wrote to Saada in the spirit of the conversation with his mother.

The clock in the turret over the stables was striking six as he went down the shallow stairs to put the letter into the box. The irrevocable step was taken, he felt more at ease than he had done through many troubled days.

CHAPTER XV

THE MAN WHO WON

SAADA, after the first shock of her husband's faithlessness, preserved an outward calm. Neither to her father nor to her friends did she say anything. It was, for the time at any rate, a secret locked in her own heart. As to the ultimate result of Lance's duplicity she was in doubt: whether, in the course of time and more sober reasoning, he would endeavour to clear away the barrier which his conduct had raised.

For a long time, after the guests had gone, the sheikh had insisted on her seeking the rest and quiet of her room. She stood by the open window and stared unseeingly down the blanched, winding road which her husband had taken. The desert wind blew refreshingly on her palid face and caught the loose tresses of her hair; the fragrance of the flowers in the garden filled the air with a drowsy perfume. She, who had always loved Africa until now, wanted to go away . . . far beyond the towns into the silent wastes of sand, and there fight out the bitter discord in her soul.

The hour had brought understanding. She had never known Lance really. The sudden stroke of fortune had revealed the character hitherto hidden

from her. For the love of money and position he had thrown her aside . . . as something of little consequence and less worth.

And this was her wedding-day! On the altar of surrender her hopes lay crushed and dead. She could not tell her father. There was no reason why his life should be still further darkened by the knowledge of her sorrow. In time the man she had trusted and tried to love would write . . . and perhaps express regret for his action. But there could be no going back: no union of a dead with a living heart. She resolved all this and more in the first few hours following his departure, and resolved that, no matter what happened, she could never live in the house which was to have been her home.

She had a little money left . . . enough to keep both her and the sheikh at the hotel until she was in a frame of mind to decide what best could be done for the future.

She was quite sure that, in a little while, she would hear from Lance . . . either to say he would not be returning to Africa or to suggest the reunion which she could never agree to.

The greatest difficulty that faced Saada was to advance a sensible reason why she should not go to the villa. The sheikh himself raised the point the following morning.

“You will be glad to get into your home, child —to have around you your own pretty things.”

She could have laughed at the bitter irony of it all. To walk the silent rooms which should have reechoed to their happy laughter; to touch the presents he had given her . . . to be reminded in a score of ways of the happiness that had passed her by.

She shook her head, and a sad smile flitted across her face.

"I shall leave everything just as it is until he returns," she answered quietly. "It is his home. We will go to it—together."

Yet she knew in her heart this could not be: that, though she forgave him, she could never feel towards him as a wife towards a husband. He had sacrificed her on the altar of greed and ambition, and only the cold ashes of a romance that was dead, and beyond recall, remained.

The sheikh, though sorely puzzled, surrendered submissively. To see Saada happy in her own choice had always been his first care. To bow to the desire of loved ones . . . had not the Koran written the enjoinder in letters of gold upon the walls of his house?

One morning, some five or six days after her husband's departure, Saada was returning from a solitary walk to the oasis of El Schri near by. She loved to be there alone—to throw herself down on a mossy bank in the shade of tall, graceful palms, and listen to the music of the running stream that wound its silvery course through the island of luscious green until it was lost in the thirsty sand.

She had reached the end of the narrow street faced by the square tower of the mosque of Beni Djama, where the white flag hung lazily in the heat of high noon and the muezzin in a shrill voice called the midday prayer, when behind her she heard a voice.

“Mrs. Railsford!”

She turned, and a pleased smile suffused her brown cheeks at sight of the tall form of John Williams. He had altered since the Batna days: a well-made suit fitted his splendid figure; from the crown of his massive head to the tips of his white boots he looked nicely groomed and well cared for.

“This is a great surprise!” she said, extending her small hand, which he took in a big hearty grip. “I heard you were expected in El Bouira, but had no idea when you would be coming.”

“How did you know that?” he asked, eyeing her curiously.

Almost without thinking she blurted out,

“Oh, from Mr. Snitch, of course. He said the other day he had written to you at Batna.”

A grateful laugh escaped Williams, and he wrung her hand more heartily still.

“I can see now. The mystery no longer puzzles me. It is to you I owe my good luck. Mr. Snitch was very close. He wouldn’t say who had recommended me. And now I know . . . it was you.”

She blushed guiltily.

“I hope . . . you didn’t mind?”

“Mind!” His manner was touched with a cer-

tain graveness. "I owe all I have in life to you. You lifted me out of the mire in Tunis; because of your friendship I resolved to be a man . . . to fight once again and win back my self-esteem. And now you have put in my way a fresh chance. I wonder . . . why you have done all this for me."

"I couldn't tell you. I simply don't know . . . unless——"

"Unless—what?" he questioned.

Saada regarded him with a look of grave inquiry.

"I don't know—unless it was the desire which every woman has to see a man get back to what he once was. You know how I have always felt about you . . . ever since that dreadful night in Constantine."

He laughed softly, though his grey eyes darkened.

"You have not forgotten, then?"

She shook her head.

"I shall never forget. I should not be here now but for you. But tell me, Mr. Williams, why did you leave behind for me and my husband"—she had to steady herself to get out the words—"that terrible letter? It wasn't true, you know; I knew it wasn't true the moment I saw you a week later in Batna. You hadn't slipped back: I don't believe you have touched the drug since you gave your word."

"Is your faith in me so great?"

She looked down to hide something in her deep violet eyes.

"It has never wavered," she said simply. "There was a look on your face—something in your voice, when you made the promise. I felt that all the fiends from the lower world could never drag you down again."

"It's awfully encouraging to hear you say that," he admitted. "They had a very good try. For days and nights I was like a mad thing, tossed this way and that between the desire to win out and the craving for the drug. But, somehow, the long weary battles always ended the same way: I just told myself to keep on thinking of you; to remember your face as I had last seen it . . . and I used to repeat your parting words. You don't know how much they meant to me."

"I think I do," she said, staring into the blinding sunshine. "They just helped you when you were weary. I can see you have suffered: I can also see . . . you have conquered."

He faced her—a magnificently proportioned figure, in the blaze of the hot sunlight . . . his strong face marred but resolute, his immensely broad shoulders thrown back with a suggestion of pride.

"Do I still show the dreadful tell-tale marks?" His tone was edged with yearning.

Saada's lips trembled at the childlike appeal coming straight from the heart of this strong man.

"Some of the signs will always be there . . . to remind you of what you once were; to encourage you to remain as you are," she said gently. "And yet," regarding him critically, "you are so very different. Your eyes are brighter, your mouth is firmer . . . I was almost going to say more grim . . . and you walk as though you had flung a heavy burden from your shoulders. Still, in some curious way—you are the same."

His hand went to his head, and as the lean brown fingers ran through the thick iron-grey hair, he asked,

"You don't think I've improved, then?"

She nodded briskly.

"Of course I do. You were a pitiful object when you came over that wall, full into the midst of those terrible Arabs . . . a mere bundle of rags and as thin as a knife. Now you've filled out splendidly—and you're looking ever so strong."

He laughed, and stretched his great arms to the blue of the sky.

"I'm as strong as a lion. You can't realize what it feels like to be free. For years I was a slave, shackled and bound. Yet the touch of a woman's hand, the sound of a woman's voice, freed me. I wonder if you realize how much you've done?"

"I realize," answered Saada, "that life must be quite different."

"It is," he said briskly. "From sunrise to sunset I thank God for the power to live, to enjoy every hour and minute of the day. I revel in the

sun, in the flowers, in the strength which He has given me; but most of all, I thank Him for sending you."

His voice was hushed to a reverent whisper; he looked away, beyond the slight, graceful figure of the girl standing in the sunlight, to the sweep of mystic blue where sky and desert met.

"I worked like a slave in Batna—but I wasn't a slave really," he went on. "Those were the days during which I was slipping free from my manacles. I began to feel I had earned the right to live. There's nothing like real hard work to teach a fellow self-respect."

He fell in beside her again, and she said,

"You haven't yet told me . . . why you wrote that letter. Did you want me to be disappointed in you?"

"Not exactly." He broke off. "Oh, it's rather difficult to explain. I thought you and your husband would come to see me. It isn't easy to face one's fellows when one has been so long down."

"You didn't mind facing me?"

"You—you are different. I seem to have got to know you . . . ever so well, though we were only a few hours together. I didn't even know Mr. Railsford. I—I had kept away from white men for years."

"So you wanted me to think you had fallen back?" she said, mildly reproving.

He bit his underlip. Then he jerked out,

"Somehow—I thought it better never to see you

again. I didn't dream our paths would cross in Batna. You didn't speak to me . . . ”

“I hadn't a chance. You were on one side of the square, I on the other. A little group of children clustered round you.”

“Ah, those children! You can't know how much they helped me.” She caught the slight quavering in the deep voice. “They used to slip their tiny little hands into mine and look up at me with those brown expressive eyes full of trust and innocence . . . and I used to remember . . . that once . . . I too was a child as innocent of wrong as they. It was just a bit more fire added to the blaze you started, and it helped to burn up a lot of the bad in me.”

“I'm ever so glad,” she said buoyantly. “It is splendid to see you like this. I suppose you've come to El Bouira to work for Mr. Snitch?”

“That's it. One lift-up seems to bring about another. I've been with him all the morning at the club-house, discussing what he wants me to do. I am truly grateful to you for your part in this new stroke of good fortune.”

“It is nothing really,” she assured him. “Mr. Snitch wanted some one, and immediately I thought of you. I didn't like the idea of your spending your days as an ill-paid Batna camel-driver.”

He glanced at her inquiringly.

“How did you know I was ill-paid?”

Saada tried to brazen the matter out, but under the quiet, searching glance her explanation failed.

"I—I sent Yakoub to inquire," she admitted. "I told him to find out what you were doing—how you were living—and whether you were in need of anything."

"Why?" His manner was insistent.

"Because you were my friend, and also, I admit . . . I felt curious. You said something in that letter which I felt wasn't true. I wanted to satisfy myself. And I did, too. I discovered you hadn't slipped back . . . and when the chance to work for Mr. Snitch came, I took the responsibility of recommending you. Are you sorry?"

"Sorry! Of course I'm not sorry. I'm the happiest man in the world. It does help one tremendously, you know, to feel there are people willing to hold out a hand to one who has been right down. I believe the worst punishment of all is the way in which men and women ignore the backsliders . . . and the conviction grows that neither God nor man cares what becomes of them. That is how I felt until you came."

She nodded understandingly, and they swung briskly up the slow rise together.

"You are going to forget all about the dreadful past, Mr. Williams," she said, cloaking her own misery beneath the enthusiasm she was experiencing over his success. "The future is waiting with wide-open arms. You will go forward from one triumph to another until the lost position is quite regained. Isn't that true?"

"That is what I shall strive for, Mrs. Railsford.

But sometimes I feel just a little afraid. I realize . . . I have been able to stand firm because of the stimulus you gave me. But supposing, in time, the effect should wear off, and the old temptations return? You will probably pass out of my life as suddenly as you came into it; then I shall feel so very much alone."

Saada eyed him with manifest disapproval.

"You shouldn't put any reliance on me. Strength to fight and endure must come from within. Fate brought us together that day; I did less for you than you did for me. By chance, or rather the slenderest of consequences, we meet again, here in El Bouira: you will go your way and I mine. But because of that, you mustn't lose the finer edge of courage."

His chin drooped to his chest; he looked down, ashamed and disconsolate, yet so penitent that her heart was touched.

"I have still to make you understand all that your friendship meant to me," Williams went on earnestly. "You found me a vile, unclean thing, the scorn and derision of my own as well as your people. You stretched out the hand of a woman, pure and innocent, but so strong that it led me to find my own soul. I have gone on . . . God knows how desperate and bitter the fight has been. So long as you were in North Africa I felt you were not so far away: I could think of you, in the dark hours, as being very, very near. But the time will come when you will go back to England with your

husband—which reminds me, I've talked so much about myself I haven't even congratulated you on your marriage. Please forgive my thoughtlessness."

"You sent a telegram of good wishes. We were ever so pleased to get it. How did you get to hear about the wedding?"

For a moment Williams looked confused. Then he admitted,

"I'm afraid I must confess to being very inquisitive. Traders pass constantly between Batna and El Bouira. They bring news. I wanted to hear about you . . . what you were doing, and all the rest. I felt most ashamed at not being able to send you a wedding-gift."

"Of course we should have felt angry if you had spent any of your hard-earned money."

"I had none," he admitted frankly. "By the time I had paid for my lodgings and sufficient food to keep body and soul together, I didn't possess a penny in the world. Your good friend, Mr. Snitch, sent the money to buy these clothes. Strange, isn't it, how the wheel goes round? . . . a big-hearted son of the people clothing a fellow who once prided himself on being a gentleman. We have to learn the lesson sooner or later that all are men—one just as good as another. I know, ten years ago, in my ignorance, I should have looked down on a man like Snitch. Today I'm proud to be able to look up to him. However, enough of myself. Shall I find Mr. Railsford in the town?"

I want to thank him for all he tried to do for me in Constantine."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, "but I'm afraid you won't be able to see him. He went back to England last week."

Williams stared.

"What! Gone away . . . without you?"

"Yes. His mother was taken ill. Naturally, his duty was to go to her."

"Of course. But I shouldn't have thought he would leave you. Which day did he leave?"

"On our wedding-day—an hour after we were married."

"Lord! that must have wanted some pluck. I'm afraid I could have never have done it. If you were my wife I should never have been content to let you out of my sight . . . which only shows how selfish some men can be where a woman is concerned."

"I certainly think his duty was to consider his mother," she said bravely. "A wife has so much of life before her. His mother's may be almost done."

"Yes, there's something in that," he admitted thoughtfully. "All the same, I can't quite understand. I should have wanted to take you—to be with me through the anxious time. I suppose you are right. And yet he must know how lonely you will be."

"I still have my father. I can never be lonely as long as we are together."

Williams was puzzled. It seemed such a strange

proceeding for a man to go off on his wedding-day leaving his young and beautiful wife alone, when he might easily have taken her with him.

"Of course you've no notion how long he will be gone?"

"None at all. The journey takes ten days at least . . . and then it may be some time before Mrs. Railsford recovers. Till then my father and I will remain at the Transatlantique Hotel. It is very comfortable, and everything possible is done to make our stay enjoyable. You'll come to see us?"

He looked pleased.

"I should love to. As a matter of fact, Mr. Snitch was talking about fixing me up there. He won't hear of going to any hotel but a Transatlantique . . . says they have the finest chain of hotels in North Africa, especially at Bone and Biskra; so I expect to be there with him until we start off next week for Beni El Ourit."

The white building, of fairy-like beauty under its mantling of purple bougainvillea and pink cluster-roses, stood out sharp and clear, as though carved in purest ivory, at the end of the road.

Saada was searching the shady gardens for a glimpse of her father.

"I feel sure you will find the work congenial," she said reflectively.

The man smiled.

"You couldn't have found anything to suit me better. I love Greek and Roman art . . . and

gossip has it that Mr. Snitch has tumbled on a perfect storehouse of wonderful things—bronzes, rare statuary, choice marble, fountains, doorways, and carved pillars looted from Carthage centuries ago. I mean to drag them all into the light of day, and salve the best for him. You can't imagine what a labour of love the work will be."

The deep note of the luncheon-hour gong boomed across the stillness. Saada quickened step.

"If Mr. Snitch doesn't claim you, I want you to lunch with us," she said briskly; then paused to scan the gardens, drowsy in the heat of the coming afternoon. "My father generally takes a stroll at this hour. I thought you might like to meet him before we go in. Ah, there he is—at the end of the little citron grove, talking to Yakoub."

Williams shaded his eyes and took in the bent figure of the sheikh in his red turban and long white *ghandourah*.

"I had quite forgotten for the moment that you are Arab," he said. "I always think of you as a typically English girl. Strange, isn't it? I wonder why."

Saada shook her head.

"I'm sure I couldn't tell you. Perhaps because I've stayed so long in England. However, come along, and let me introduce you."

Saada could hardly have explained why she took such pains to keep the secret of her birth from this big, open-hearted Englishman, unless it was that deep down in her heart lurked the conviction

that Mrs. Railsford's callous treatment of her was solely dictated by the supposed fact of her Arab birth. This much she read behind every word in the fatal telegram which had drawn her husband from his sworn allegiance.

The remembrance swept a surge of anger into her cheeks. Since then she had resolved that those who professed friendship should stand by her for herself alone. It was the only way to tell the dross from the gold. She went forward.

"Father, dear, I wish to present to you Mr. Williams, a very great friend of mine. You remember, don't you . . . my telling you how he came to my aid in Constantine?"

The old man bowed.

"I am honoured to meet you, Mr. Williams," he said, kissing his fingers as the other released them after a hearty grip. "Your name is often on Saada's lips. In our hearts it will always be enshrined. An Arab, you know, sir, never forgets a service rendered either to himself or to his house."

Williams blushed like an over-conscious schoolboy.

"It was nothing, I assure you. She got off the track into the dangerous quarter of the town. I merely happened to know the best way out."

"I have asked Mr. Williams to lunch with us, if Mr. Snitch does not claim him," Saada interposed.

The sheikh bowed.

"Indeed, we are doubly honoured in welcoming to our table a friend of the good Mr. Snitch. Of

all the English people we have ever met, he is the most delightful."

Saada took the sheikh's arm.

"Father, Mr. Williams is going to work for Mr. Snitch. He has appointed him to cross the desert to the palace he has bought, and to superintend the excavations at the buried Roman city beyond the oasis of Kheiroun. Don't you think he will have a most interesting experience?"

They walked up the sanded path together.

"I am sure of it," Williams interjected. "And I owe my good fortune entirely to your daughter, sheikh."

The sheikh glanced across at Saada. He could not understand why, again and again, since the night when he revealed the secret of her birth, she had refused to allow a living soul to share it. As she made no sign, he took the cue, and said simply,

"Neither I nor my daughter will ever forget the service you have rendered us. Ah, here comes a messenger!"

Diminutive Abdul, the Nubian boy, hurried forward and salaamed before the tall Englishman.

"Mos' noble highbrow," he said in a high-pitched, sing-song voice with a pronounced American accent only recently acquired from a party of delightful New Yorkers who had taken a deep pleasure in encouraging it. "The great rich Englishman—General Vis-count Lor' Snitch, him leave messages to say if Mistah Willyum come, I guess he gottum kick his 'eels in dis yah place till three o'clock.

Genelmans, Abdul put it over on you orl correck."

Williams laughed and tossed the lad a coin.

"Thank you. And that means," turning to Saada, very much amused by the little fellow's quaintness, "I am free to lunch with you."

The sheikh thought him very charming—so very unlike, so much more friendly and approachable than Saada's husband. He recalled a score of occasions when Railsford had made him conscious of the barrier that the white men always raise between themselves and the people of his race. Williams, apparently, had no such feelings; he honoured his host by insisting that the conversation be carried on entirely in Arabic. For Saada the hour passed happily . . . more happily than she had known since coming to El Bouira. After Lance's departure scarcely a soul, expect Theodore Snitch and his daughter, had spoken either to herself or to the sheikh.

She treasured the memory of that little gathering long after Williams had gone. The following morning he left with his employer and Hetty Snitch, the whole party mounted on camels. For a fortnight nothing was heard of them. Then one Saturday morning, while she was arranging fresh flowers in her bedroom, word came up that a gentleman was waiting in the vestibule to see her. She went down and saw John Williams . . . not the neatly-dressed man who had stopped her in the street of El Bouira, but a huge, loose-limbed fellow in riding breeches, a much-soiled shirt open at the

throat, and uncovered arms that rippled where the sunlight played on sinew and muscle.

He looked very splendid, if very untidy, as he stood in the open doorway, a wide-brimmed hat swinging in his right hand. For the first time Saada was conscious of the immense strength in his great gaunt frame.

"I'm not at all presentable, Mrs. Railsford," he said, striding briskly towards her. "You must really forgive my appearance, but I rode straight from my work through the night to bring a note of invitation from Theodore Snitch. He wants you to join him and Miss Hetty to see the wonderful excavations we have made."

Saada's face lit up.

"I should just love to come. How have *you* been getting on?"

He avoided the personal note in her inquiry.

"Oh, magnificently! We made some amazing discoveries. Tomorrow early we are opening a chamber which has been closed for more than two thousand years. We can just see into it . . . crammed with Greek art treasures brought from Athens in a Roman ship . . . ornaments, bronzes, tazzas, marble figures, urns and vases. Nothing would satisfy the boss but that I fetched you."

"I had better see my father first," she said. "I should like him to come too, but I'm afraid at his time of life the journey would be rather too much. What do you think?"

"I'm sure it would. Travelling over leagues of

sand, even on a good horse, is rather exhausting. Mr. Snitch commissioned me to get the best mare in El Bouira for you. How soon could you be ready?"

"Almost at once," she replied. "Father is upstairs. He'll be only too pleased for me to go. The post is just being brought up. I shall wait to see if there are any letters."

Williams backed to the door.

"Very well. I'll be back in half an hour, with the mare bridled and saddled. We can make Beni El Ourit in ten hours, now that the old trackway has been cleared."

He ran lightly down the steps and swung out into the sunshine—a fine figure in his rough clothes. Saada's glance followed him till the trees hid him; then she turned as Abdul shuffled into the vestibule, calling at the top of his shrill voice,

"Numbah 271 Railsford! Numbah 271. Bech-your-life, lady, that's for yew."

He held out an envelope bearing Lance's familiar handwriting. A deadly coldness crept over her as she sought the silence of her room. The covering dropped to the floor; she sank down in the nearest chair and tried to steel herself to read in sequence each line of the letter. But her eyes wandered here and there, picking up only detached sentences that crushed the last shred of hope in her heart.

CHAPTER XVI

SEPARATION

“I feel that I alone am to blame,” Lance had written. “Time and again you did your utmost to stay me on a course which I should have known could only end in disaster. But I was blind. I wrongly imagined that love—such love as I deceived myself into thinking I had for you—would be strong enough to sweep all barriers of creed and colour away.”

THE light of a deep scorn blazed in Saada’s eyes as she read the lying reference to her religious belief. Always Lance had known she was Christian, and that of her own desire she had embraced the faith of the Cross. She turned the closely-written page.

“Of course, the inevitable reaction came as soon as I was free of Africa. I shook off the shackles which held me enchainéd—a prisoner remote from my own fellows. You did not dream—I wish to God I had possessed the courage to tell you—all that I suffered at the hands of my own people the last few weeks before our marriage. Both you and I were objects of pity and derision. I could not stand that here in England . . . either to see you spurned and set aside as of no account, or I myself to endure the compassion of those among whom I moved. I have therefore decided, after mature consider-

ation, never to return to El Bouira. I must live my life, even as you must live yours . . . alone: at least, not quite alone, for you have your father, even as I have my mother.

“I would ask you, out of the greatness of your heart, and out of sympathy for me, to forgive the pain which a letter such as this must bring. Do not think me unmindful of my responsibilities or of the misery which I have caused. I shall carry them with me all my days. It is better to write this, to be quite candid over a matter which can be settled only in one way—by absolute and final separation. Try to think of me as kindly as you can, and

“Believe me to remain,

“Always yours sorrowfully,

“LANCE.”

So she came to the end . . . to the end of her married life of less than a day, and as she stood there with the sunlight falling upon her in the full flush of her perfect womanhood, tears welled up from the depths of her eyes and coursed slowly down her cheeks. Neither bitterness nor anger moved her now: the fires of scorn had burnt out as swiftly as they had risen . . . only the dull ache of sorrow weighed heavily upon her soul.

For a little while she remained thus, the breeze from the open window fluttering the letter in her nerveless clasp. Out of the gloom her thoughts groped back to the hour when Lance had stood at her side, giving his promise before the altar of God! The scene changed to the long gay room

downstairs garlanded with flowers . . . she saw again the words of his mother's message; they burned in letters of fire across the darkness of her mind. For the sake of money he had sacrificed her. The knowledge was not new: only reawakened in a more definite form.

She forced a weary, self-condemning smile at her own weakness now that the big shock had come . . . and she tried to think of John Williams, and how, were the positions reversed, he would have borne himself under it. He had gone down . . . but manlike, having groped blindly through the darkness, he had at last fought his way back to light. She, too, must do the same. And always she would have his sympathy and her father's love.

The point in her reflection brought her face to face with a fresh difficulty—how to break the news to the sheikh. So far as he was aware, Lance was in England merely to be near his sick mother. His absence had not distressed him at all. In time the Englishman would return to take up the threads of life where misfortune had forced him to lay them down.

Folding the letter into her dress, Saada dried her tears and stole quietly into his room. She betrayed no emotion as she spoke of Theodore Snitch's invitation.

"Of course go, child," said the old man, in a gentle voice, as he removed his spectacles, and setting down the copy of the Koran he was studying, he took her brown, softly-rounded arm and

stroked it affectionately. "The little change will do you good; and I know that Mr. Williams will take care of you."

"I am sure he will," she said gravely. "I shall be quite all right with him."

The old man looked up suddenly.

"I heard Abdul calling a little while since. I suppose the mail is in. Will you not be hearing from your husband?"

Saada's hand went to her cheek. She longed to share with some one the sorrow that lay so heavily upon her. Yet still further to bring trouble to the last days of this frail old man was a prospect against which every fibre of her being revolted. She knew she was but temporizing with a situation that sooner or later must be faced. She wanted time to realize more fully and to plan how best to meet the changed conditions under which henceforward she would have to live.

"I hardly expect to get another letter from him so soon," she replied, colouring. "You forget . . . I heard from him when he left Marseille. Good-bye, dear," bending to kiss the lined face. "Tell Yakoub to look after you while I am gone. I shall be back some time on Monday."

"Some time on Monday," the sheikh repeated, reaching for his gold-mounted cane, and following slowly to the door. "The blessing of the Most High be upon you, and may He bring you safely home again."

He kissed her on each cheek and laid her hand

upon his breast; gave her his blessing and watched with his faded eyes full of love till the turn in the stairs hid her from sight.

Saada went back to the bedroom to prepare for the long ride, strangely calm and self-possessed. The first wave of horror had passed on, leaving behind a numbness of body and mind. The climax had not been altogether unexpected; ever since the discovery of her husband's duplicity she had waited, half anticipating the worst. The reading of the telegram, never intended for her sight, which had at the time been such a dreadful blow—now proved to be her best ally. The forewarning enabled her to bear with composure a shock which must have otherwise swept both hope and courage away.

She dressed in a neat brown riding habit and straight-brimmed hat, and went down. She looked very lovely in the eyes of the man waiting on the hotel verandah. Yet, watching her narrowly as she crossed the vestibule, a short riding-crop swinging in her left hand, he thought the last few minutes had wrought a startling change. Black shadows had gathered under the long lashes that lay like softest silk upon the bloom of her cheek; the sweet mouth, which but a few moments before had shown a smile, was set in a thin, purposeful line; the very carriage of the straight slim form was different.

“You look very grim and businesslike, Mrs. Railsford,” he said laughingly, picking up her

small handcase. "You're not nervous, I hope, of facing the perils of the desert in such restricted numbers?"

Saada made a desperate effort to throw off the heavy depression, and her lips twisted into a smile.

"Good gracious, no. I should feel safe anywhere with you. Besides, the natives hereabouts are quite friendly. What a lovely horse! Is it your choice?"

She passed behind him and patted the glossy, arched neck of the mare.

"Especially for you. She is pure-bred and reliable. Are we quite ready?"

"Quite," she answered, slipping one foot into the stirrup and landing lightly in the saddle. "I feel I want to get away from El Bouira . . . for a time. The most perfect surroundings in the world call for a change after a while, don't you think? In the two months we have been here . . . apart from visits to the villa, I have never once been outside the town. I can't tell you how glad I am to get away. But," as the horses broke into a sharp canter that carried them through the Bab Mokhara gate towards the fringe of the desert, "why are you so quiet?"

"I am wondering what has happened to you—since I left you in the hotel half an hour ago."

"What has happened to me? Whatever do you mean?" Saada asked with an assumed lightness which failed altogether to deceive him. "I'm just the same. Do I look any different?"

"You are different," Williams said bluntly. "Under the sunburn your face is pale . . . and . . . your lips are trembling. I believe, too, you've been crying. What's the matter? Do tell me—please."

At last the brave effort she had made so long was beginning to fail. A lump rose in her throat; she swiftly averted her face and said in a shaky whisper,

"Don't ask me now. I couldn't tell you. I shall be all right in a little while. Please don't worry about me."

"Something has upset you?"

She pursed her lips, but made no other sign; only the eyes that looked straight ahead over the immense sweep of red-gold sand were moist with tears.

"I won't bother you now—but later on you will tell me," he said with sudden decision. "It's easier for two to carry a trouble than to bear it alone. I'm afraid I'm rather presumptuous, but I hate to see you sad."

"I'm not sad really. Only . . . something . . . upset me. I didn't much like leaving my father."

Williams looked surprised.

"He didn't mind your coming with me. Perhaps I should have consulted him first; only I thought, as you were now married——"

"Of course it was quite right to ask me. My father raised no objection, and has entire confidence in you. He knows all about you."

"All!" he repeated slowly.

"Yes. I told him . . . the first night he came to Constantine, and ever since he has wanted to meet you. He takes the Arab view of the matter: that henceforward my life consists of three parts—one of which I owe to Allah, the second to my parents, and the third to you. Consequently he isn't at all likely to disapprove of my accompanying you on a day's journey across the desert."

Williams emitted a short laugh.

"Both you and your father take too serious a view of a very slight service. Frankly, I'm not entitled to a grain of gratitude from either. At the time I wasn't even master of my own actions, let alone of my will. Nothing but the primitive instinct to go to the aid of a woman in distress, prompted me. I was hopelessly intoxicated . . . until something you said brought me to my senses."

Saada was glad the conversation was drifting away from her.

"All that belongs to the past," she said. "You know my feelings in the matter—that always, always, I shall feel I owe my life to you. But more satisfying still is the knowledge that you have won out so splendidly."

"A man can do most things, backed by a woman's sympathy," he answered earnestly. "Neither religion nor 'the power that in one lies' can do quite so much."

"Sympathy is religion," she said quickly. "At least it is the basis of all religions that count."

"In the sense that sympathy begets love. Yes,

I agree. And yet men and women mustn't think of one another in terms of love unless they are either related or engaged to be married. But love is often there all the same . . . if you allow that holding your life is worthless unless every thought and every action are prompted by the desire to please others. That, to my mind, is love; because it knows neither conventions nor men-made laws, but it is the natural expression of the human heart."

"We are drifting to dangerous ground," she said, in a tone of light reproof. "We can care for others without love entering into the matter at all."

"But to care is to love," he insisted. "Oh, I don't mind how you hedge it around with artificial qualifications . . . the gratitude which burns in the heart towards one's fellows is love, the Divine Gift of God. Doesn't it sound strange to hear words like that . . . coming from me?"

"Why strange?" she asked quietly.

He placed his wide-brimmed hat on the high pommel of the saddle and raised his glowing face to the full glory of the sun. An expression of serene peace had settled on him. Watching him, magnificent of stature, sitting his horse like a centaur, she marvelled that behind such imposing strength was the simplicity of a child.

"Because of all human creatures I have been the most vile," he said. "Look at me . . . made in the image of God, yet self-defiled. I see myself

every day as you must have seen me that night in the little garret of Constantine . . . and I thank Him for the love that crept in your heart to help raise me up. People who know me now think I am a sad, lonely man. Well, yes, sometimes I am sad, and at times I am tempted to feel lonely . . . until I remember what I once was and what I now have the chance to be. Then my heart just fills . . . and I know that life, through sunshine or storm, is only one long glad song. Lord! I can laugh and sing the long day through . . . and return thanks every hour for the understanding you gave me."

Saada made no answer, her mind too full for words, and for a long while they rode in silence. The world lay around them—a marvel of blue and gold . . . unflecked sky and gleaming sand painted with tawny marigold and blue borage. Here and there traces of long-neglected cultivation showed amongst the ruin of half-buried walls and broken columns; agaves reared their long green heads above the parched ground, and occasional carobs, dark as yews, threw welcome patches of lengthening shade.

The subtle perfume that the girl exhaled mingled with the scent of stray clusters of succamelle and flowering vetches, purple, white, and blue, and where the scarlet sainfoin was the thickest a lonely cluster of palms thrust their straight trunks out of the thirsty sand. Here they sat down, and while

Williams hobbled and tethered the horses, Saada set out a snow-white cloth and spread upon it the contents of the picnic basket.

"We must rest though the noon or the horses will be knocked up," he explained, after giving each a drink of water from one of the skins. "By starting again at two we shall make Beni El Ourit at six."

Saada's glance was wandering among the piles of loose rubbish and heaped-up stone.

"At one time there must have been quite a large town here," she remarked, passing over a handful of sandwiches.

Williams stopped in the process of munching steadily.

"We stand on the dust of numerous civilizations," he said, picking up a number of fragments. "Look at these . . . dead bones of the past, yet each voicing its own sad story. The Romans came and built a grand city here . . . you can see the line of the ancient viaduct which stretched for thirty miles and fed the proud legionaries with water from El Bouira. This is Moorish," holding out a specimen of zig-zagged carved work, "and below, on the face of the slender column, you see the handiwork of your own people . . . the rose and crescent of the sons of Islam."

A faint, almost imperceptible sigh drifted from her slightly-parted lips as she bent her head over the exquisite example of Moorish and Arabic workmanship. That reference to her Arab blood

brought back with startling reality the recollections of the letter that lay against her heart.

Saada was conscious of William's clear grey eyes watching her with curious intent; she tilted the brim of her hat and said in a low voice,

"Wouldn't you like to smoke?"

He set down the water-can and heaped up a pile of sand for her to rest against. Then in a grave, sympathetic tone he said,

"Now I want you to tell me what is troubling you. All the morning I've been conscious of it. Isn't there any way in which I can help you?"

A terrible loneliness settled on the girl. For weeks she had fought the long battle in the silence of her own thoughts.

"Thank you ever so much. I know you mean to be kind, but neither you nor any one else can help me. We Arabs, you know, have a simple but very true saying, 'Sorrow is a house best kept shut till gladness becomes a visitor.' "

The man sat down, and clasping his hands over his hunched-up knees, drew for a moment thoughtfully at his pipe. The fragrant smoke coiled above his bared head and drifted away in little clouds under the caress of the gentle wind.

"On the surface, Mrs. Railsford, your proverb looks sound enough. My own case, however, disproves its wisdom. I too had a sadness, more burdensome possibly than yours, because its genesis was in guilt and sin. But a visitor came and knocked at the door of the house of gloom, and

where she stood a great light shone into the dark places. You know . . . I am referring to you?"

Saada shook her head.

"In that case, I had it in my power to help: you have not. Therefore why bother you, or any one, with troubles that can't be avoided?"

"If not avoided at least they can sometimes be shared . . . and that may mean only half the weight. Won't you let me come to your aid—even as you came to mine?"

The wistful pleading touched her deeply. She hesitated a moment, then said suddenly,

"I am worrying about my father. There is something which he ought to know . . . must know before very long. Yet I am afraid of what will happen. I believe the shock will break his heart."

"Your father is a man of the world," he ventured sympathetically. "There is surely nothing to trouble you that he cannot understand."

The girl sighed. Her whole nature was crying silently for sympathy, for some one to help her in the lone battle she had fought so long.

"You must tell me," the man went on, coming closer and touching her arm with the tips of his fingers. "There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do to help you. What do you fear about Sheikh Medene?"

"He is very old and frail." Her tones were tremulous. "For a long time he has suffered with his heart. I'm afraid . . . to tell him what is worrying me—in case the shock hurts him. Per-

haps there is a way out, if only I could see it. Really—I ought to have taken him into my confidence and have asked his advice before I left the hotel this morning. When I saw him in his room he looked so worn and aged that my courage failed. I wanted to come this desert ride with you . . . to give myself time to think—to decide what to do for the best."

He drew the small hand warmly into his. The very touch seemed to give Saada confidence. She looked up into his face, strong and encouraging yet full of sympathy.

"You know I will help you . . . that anything you tell me will never pass from my lips. What is your difficulty?"

In a moment her mind was made up. She steadied herself and replied,

"My husband has left me. I dare not tell my father. It would break his heart. Oh," turning to him quickly, "you don't think I've done wrong to tell you?"

"Wrong? Of course you've done no wrong, my dear child. We seem to have been fated to help each other over great crises. But really . . . I don't understand. How has Mr. Railsford left you? You can't mean—he has gone away and won't return?"

She did not look at him now, but cast her troubled gaze down at the hot sand, in which she traced imaginary figures.

"He will never return," she said slowly. "I had

a letter from him only this morning, while you were away hiring the mare. He says quite definitely he will never come back."

"I'm afraid you half expected something of the sort. It did not come altogether as a surprise."

"Why do you say that?" she asked in a puzzled whisper.

The ghost of a smile clung to his lips.

"I read the story of your unhappiness in your face—your eyes—the moment you stopped to talk to me in El Bouira. You were very reticent—about your husband. You didn't even mention his name . . . and that was strange from a young bride only just married. I could see something was troubling you. Oh," his manner suddenly becoming very gentle, "I'm glad you've told me, because at least you will know there is some one who sympathizes and understands. You do trust me, don't you?"

Their eyes met and in hers was a look of complete confidence.

"I would trust you with my life. I couldn't speak to any one as I have to you. When you asked me, hours ago, I wanted to open my heart. You were right and I was wrong. It does one good to share a sorrow with a friend."

A deep, true compassion stirred him.

"I have lived and struggled so that one day I might be worthy to be called your friend," he answered simply. "No greater reward could be given to any man. Come, now," dropping into the soft

sand at her feet and looking up into her troubled face, "we will face this together, and you will try to be brave and strong, even as I tried when you came to my rescue. Why has Railsford treated you like this?"

"I believe he regretted his engagement to me some time before our marriage. He was afraid of the consequences of having an Arab girl as his wife."

Williams smothered an oath.

"Then why in the name of fortune didn't he have the courage to say so before? The man's a cur! Forgive my speaking like this about your husband. He knew you were of native blood: he took you for yourself alone . . . because he loved you."

"Or thought he loved me," she interposed ironically. "So many men make that mistake and haven't the courage to draw back while there is time. More than once I half suspected he might regret, and I gave him the chance. But always he assured me his love was strong enough to stand the test. Perhaps I was to blame more than he—for going on. I ought to have known that a union between a white man and an Arab girl is foredoomed to disaster."

Williams set his hands behind him and the clenched knuckles sank deep into the yielding dust as his body straightened. She caught the flash of his grey eyes and the scornful set of his mouth.

"No! No, a thousand times, no! It isn't true. The man who really cares for a woman gives him-

self, body and soul. He isn't affected by race, creed, or colour. He loves her for herself alone . . . because she is all in all to him . . . because no one else can find a place in his heart. God made them both . . . and he will admit no such distinctions. I speak as I feel: and I do not think I am wrong. His duty was to stand by you."

She nodded.

"At least over this I'm glad Lance had the courage of his opinions. For myself, I am beyond caring very much. There comes a time when a woman feels her heart is dead. No further hurt can come —to wound me more deeply. But I can still feel for my father."

"Of course you must tell him."

"I know," she admitted. "The secret can't be kept much longer. You know what it is when one is faced with a great difficulty . . . the temptation to drive off the evil hour. In a little while he will wonder why Lance doesn't return. Then I shall have to tell him."

"You must try not to take it too deeply to heart. At least you are better off than being held for life to a man for whom you have lost respect. Love then would be out of the question."

"I no longer care for him," she said quietly. "He has killed all the love I ever had. It went . . . when he went . . . in the first hour of our married life. No matter what happens now, I never want to see him again."

"You must try not to be bitter," he pleaded.

"Perhaps in some wonderful way, which at present you can't see, everything will come right. Men do very foolish things—and live to repent. It may be so with your husband."

Saada looked as though she were pondering very deeply. In a little while she broke the silence.

"I have tried to make every allowance for peculiar circumstances; he was always very rigidly brought up on the 'pride of race' principle—and his mother, I know, has all along been against our engagement and marriage. There are some things, though, which it would be unwise to forget. I might forgive, because at times a woman can find it in her heart to forgive anything. But to ignore the past as though nothing had ever happened—to try to join up the broken threads . . . no!"—shaking her head definitely—"I could not do that. Life would never be the same. I should always have the feeling that at the first breath of trouble he would leave me to my fate."

Saada showed neither bitterness nor anger . . . only an effable sadness which was no indication of weakness, because her eyes were aflame with resolution.

"I could have forgiven him so much more easily had he found a viewpoint and stuck to it," she continued. "He was entitled to hold his opinions about the wisdom of marrying a coloured girl. A good many friends, I believe, tried to influence him directly he came to El Bouira. Still he went on, either for fear of hurting me or because he really

had some sort of affection. Then money came . . . and that changed everything."

"Ah! I didn't know that. Did some one leave him a legacy?"

"A very large fortune. A rich uncle died, leaving him one of the largest estates in England. I suppose he didn't much relish the notion of introducing his Arab wife into the ancestral home."

But for Williams' tragic expression she could have laughed. If only Lance could share the secret which the sheikh had confided to her she wondered what course then he would have taken. Would he have made the best of a bad job, have stuck to her with some show of loyalty, and been at pains to explain to all and sundry that his girl-wife had no more black blood in her veins than he or they? A spirit of amused contempt seemed to have banished the depression of an hour ago. She began to gather up the cardboard plates and folding cups.

"We must be starting soon or we shan't make Beni el Ourit before nightfall," she remarked, glancing upward at the sun.

Williams rose and held out his hand to lift her to her feet.

"You don't regret having made a confidant of me?" he asked.

She smiled.

"I'm ever so glad. I feel as though a weight is lifted from my mind. But I must confess," becoming suddenly businesslike, "I see no reason why you should be bothered with my difficulties."

"I am wondering what the future holds for you," he said thoughtfully; "whether you will go back to England or stay in North Africa."

She laughed ironically.

"I've no desire to go back . . . a married woman without a husband! In Africa no one will either know or care, once I leave El Bouira. I shall have to do something to earn a living. My father is very poor."

He nodded.

"I quite understand. You don't want to be dependent even on a rich husband. I wonder what you can do?"

She smiled down at him as he lifted her foot into the stirrup.

"Please don't worry. Something will come along. I managed to earn a living in England: I shall do the same here, no doubt. Now, having decided on the inevitable, shall we forget all about it, and think only of our first and last excursion?"

Her words struck him with something like a shock. As they rode through the blinding sunlight together he reflected on the cruelty of fate which could allow one man to throw aside a treasure which he himself would give his life to win. Saada was trying to put a brave face on a situation as dark and desperate as it well could be; she talked with a forced gaiety, heedless of the somewhat curt monosyllables with which he replied. His heart was filling with a wild, passionate longing for her in her trouble. He wanted to take the sweet, sad

face between his hands and to kiss the misery from her lips. The hour had revealed what long had lain dormant in his soul—that without her the years ahead must be always empty, because love had come to him. Yes! It was well to face the truth now. Nothing was to be gained by self-deception. The world held only one woman for him—Saada, the wife of another man!

CHAPTER XVII

THE MAN BETWEEN

YIELDING to the entreaties of Mr. Snitch and Hetty, Saada's stay at Beni el Ourit lengthened to a week. She was glad of the opportunity to enjoy surroundings and a society pleasantly removed from the depressing atmosphere which had marked the last few days in El Bouira. Theodore Snitch—as well he might be—was enthusiastic over the progress made. Williams was proving a wonderful organizer. The forty odd workmen whom he had brought had been transformed by his magnetic personality from a disorganized rabble into a well-drilled squad. Four o'clock each morning found them on the site of the buried city, toiling like ants to remove the deep layers of soft sand, and each day new and wonderful treasures were being brought to light.

Saada usually went down with Hetty in the afternoon to inspect the morning's discoveries. She roamed, fascinated, between long rows of carved figures, many broken, but not a few in perfect preservation—a marble Demeter with a face which Williams thought almost as classically beautiful as her own, a Victory Minerva as fine as the famed

example found at Bulla Regia, a winged Eros in bronze, perfect save for the lost enamelled eyes; dancing nymphs as pretty as any of Murillo's smiling cherubs. In the patio of a Roman house, decorated later by the addition of carved pillars surmounted by horseshoe arches in black and white marble, they uncovered a wonderful mosaic representing the gift of the vine from Dionysius to Icarus, so beautiful that it seemed almost a pity to carry it away.

And as she watched the great work going on—the unflagging energy and zeal with which John Williams threw himself into the delicate and often difficult operations—Saada became conscious that her interest in this man whom her influence had reclaimed was something more than interest in a friend. The realization startled her: she tried to put him out of her thoughts, and, failing utterly, decided to return to El Bouira. She confided her intention to Hetty, who immediately carried it to her father, with consequences directly opposed to those which Saada deemed wise.

“Splendid!” said Mr. Snitch, turning from an engrossing examination of a number of Libyo-Punic inscriptions which Williams had translated. “I want to give my right-hand another little break: he’s been working too hard since you came; in fact, I’m expecting every day to see him crock up. John, come here: I want to talk to you.”

A tall figure emerged through a cloud of dust, and Williams, with the perspiration streaming

down his face and bare shoulders, presented himself.

"Mrs. Railsford thinks she had better be getting back," the little man said. "I'd like you to take her . . . and not return till you've had a full week's rest."

Williams extended a long brown arm.

"But what about these fellows? I can't leave them. You'll find them chopping up all sorts of treasures . . . marble fountains and Greek vases."

"You do as you're told," grunted Snitch good-humouredly. "Het and me will look after the dagoes. I'm taking to this excavation like a duck to water. Mrs. Railsford can't go back alone, and as there's no one else to take her, you must."

The big fellow laughed and stared across at Saada, who stood some little distance off, talking to one of the workmen.

"You're not thinking it too much of a hardship, I reckon," Snitch went on bluntly.

Williams unshaded his eyes.

"I should love to go," he answered uneasily. "But really I'd much rather hang on here."

Snitch shot him a puzzled glance; then he said, "Look here, you go, or you won't get that fifty a month rise I promised you. It's time you learnt to be obedient."

The other passed his hand across his moist forehead.

"It's not money that's bothering me now, sir. I'm just interested in the work—that's all."

The half-truth had to suffice. How could he confess that every hour alone with Saada was but a mad intoxication of hopeless desire to pour out the story of his love? For days past he had done everything in his power—without appearing ill-mannered or boorish—to avoid her; now, here was his employer deliberately throwing them together.

His manner became grim.

"All right, I'll go. And thank you for the offer of time off. I shan't need it, though. You'll see me back inside of three days."

Snitch laughed, and pulling contentedly at his cigar, passed on.

"You'd better not," he called over his shoulder. "If I see you inside a week I'll fire you. Make arrangements to leave first thing tomorrow . . . and don't forget to enjoy yourself."

He never guessed how far from possible the playful admonition was. Love of Saada had brought no joy to John; for ever there rose before him the spectral figure of the man between. Snitch was being unconsciously cruel to throw them together at a time when by all the laws governing happiness they should be most far apart. He turned to his work again, revolving every aspect of a condition which bothered him. To have fallen in love with a girl who regarded him only as a friend was bad enough: to love with the full ardour of his soul a woman bound for life to a man she did not care for was infinitely worse. He wondered what Saada would say if she knew: whether she would turn

from him as every one had done at the time of his great fall. That would be a hurt more deep than pain of the secret passion consuming him. He could not think of life without her friendship.

They rode away together in the early morning hours to catch the cool of the day before the sun was fully up; he, wrapped in a sombre silence, she curiously puzzled. Once or twice Saada tried to break the chill of reserve, heedless of the grip he was keeping on himself.

"You will follow Mr. Snitch's advice to take a few days' rest in El Bouira?" she remarked, when in the approach of twilight clumps of nodding palm and verdant patches of cultivated land marked their near approach to the town.

For the first time in many hours a smile replaced his gloomy expression.

"No!" he said with marked emphasis. "I shall risk the old man's wrath by going back. There's nothing I want to do in El Bouira. He thinks it would please me to burn my first month's pay. Lord! that's the last thing I'd like to do . . . and as I haven't a friend except you——"

"But you will have me . . . and my father," she retorted innocently. "We will do all we can to make your little holiday pleasant. Of course you'll stay!"

"No, I shan't!" His voice was resolute—and so sharp that she shot him a startled glance.

"Why? D'you think we shouldn't like to have you with us?"

"Would you?" he asked, looking her straight in the eyes.

She met his gaze unflinchingly.

"You know I would. I've always liked being with you."

"Yes, that's just it, and I want to be with you. I know I should be happy—so happy that I'm not justified in claiming the reward. I shall go back . . . and I don't think we shall ever see each other again."

"But why not?" she questioned, momentarily taken off her guard. "Why shouldn't friends see each other sometimes?"

"If friendship will content them—yes!" His cheeks were flaming now, and the swift heaving of his chest betrayed the emotion under which he was labouring. "But does it, for long? A man's interest in a woman grows. Then is the time, not to shut it out but to fight it down. Saada, don't you realize what friendship with you means to me?"

For a little while she made no effort to reply, conscious that at last the veil had been lifted, and behind it she was glimpsing both his heart and her own.

"Yes, I believe I do," she said at length. "I know what my friendship with you has meant to me . . . the best thing I have ever had in my life."

He caught at the gloved hand resting lightly on the pommel of the saddle.

"We are neither children nor strangers," he said feelingly. "We are just souls which have come

together through suffering. Every day, every hour I find myself thinking of you."

"I think of you too," she admitted gravely. "I was dreadfully lonely till you came."

"And you will be lonely again when I have gone?"

His heart almost ceased to beat as he hung on her answer. She bent her head and looked at him through a mist of tears.

"We mustn't talk about it." The words almost failed her. "You were right, and I was wrong. You must go away . . . we ought never to try to see each other again. Oh, why do things happen like this? Why did we meet that night in Constantine?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it was fate that drew us together and made you the one great influence in my life . . . and it is fate that must keep us apart. There is no other way, is there, Saada?"

"No, John," she murmured faintly. "There is no other way."

Their hands met in a clasp of perfect understanding; then he said very gravely,

"We must play the game right through to the end. It was destined we should. I have been thinking about this for days. I didn't want Mr. Snitch to send me with you."

"Were you afraid?" she asked quietly.

His head rose and fell.

"Yes, horribly afraid. I kept telling myself your marriage had cheated me of my happiness.

Another day and it might never have taken place. You would have been free then . . . to let me tell you that I loved you."

She stared unseeingly into the blood-red heart of the throbbing sunset. Like those fading fires, her own happiness was passing away . . . and before both of them stretched the lonely desolation of the long night.

"I only knew what was in my own heart. I should not have let you come had I guessed what you were feeling," she said miserably.

He passed his hand over his face and his eyes emerged strong with resolution.

"I vowed to play the game—that night after you had pleaded with me. I've tried so hard ever since. I certainly won't falter now."

She regarded him with the admiration which a woman always feels for strength.

"I like to hear you say that. It is—so like you. That is the very best thing I could say of you, John . . . that I'm very proud of you."

His face was glowing.

"I would rather hear that from you than from any one in the world. Dear, the temptation has been very strong . . . to tell you sometimes all that I was thinking . . . and feeling. The other man took you—and threw you away, like a crushed flower. I wanted just to take that crushed flower up into my hands, to cherish and care for it with all the love I have. Is it very wrong to say that, dear?"

She shook her head, and he saw the teardrops glisten on her cheeks.

"It isn't wrong, John . . . for two people to feel about each other as we do. I believe that God puts love into our hearts. He has taught me to care for you . . . to love and admire all that is best in you. But it is His will that we shouldn't go further than that."

A passion of revolt stirred suddenly in the man. He lifted his agonized face to the sky, and from the depths of his innermost being there rose the question which has rung through all the ages,

"Can the God of Love be so cruel? Long ago I realized that you were made for me. You came into my life to cleanse it, and make it new . . . and clean and pure, like your own. For that I loved you: dedicated myself to you. A shadow falls between us—the shadow of the man who broke your heart and went away. For his sin are we to be eternally punished?"

"I cannot answer that, dear," she said sadly. "I only feel that if we had met sooner things might have been different; but we must go on—each in the right way, striving to do our duty. Only in that way will a measure of recompense come."

"I shall try to find mine in work," he said resolutely.

She smiled encouragement.

"And I, in forgetting—not you, but what has happened. Look! we are nearing the Bab Mok-hara gate. Yes—for the first and last time, if you

wish," and with a sudden gesture of surrender, she lifted her hand and allowed him to press it to his lips.

On the hotel verandah Yakoub was standing, watching the weekly caravans from Touggourt file in stately procession along the Bab el Moldoun. Saada waved to him, and the smile of delighted welcome which he gave showed his dazzling white teeth.

"Your fader is on high, Missy Saada," he said, helping her to alight and catching the bridles of both the horses. "The mail come two hours since, and he just go up aloft. Thank you, sar," salaaming to Williams. "You lebe the rubbing down ob dem horse to me."

"I'd better run off to book a room for tonight," said John, mounting the steps at her side. "Perhaps we may meet again after dinner."

Saada smiled.

"Come with me. Father will want to thank you for bringing me safely home. He must have been rather lonely while I was away."

They went up, chatting of anything but the thoughts closest to their hearts, and Saada knocked softly on the sitting-room door.

"He must have gone into the garden," she said, turning the handle and peeping in. Then, glancing over her shoulder at John, "No, he is here, but I believe he is asleep."

Williams drew back as she tip-toed softly through the thick pile of the carpet. He saw the

slim brown hand touch the bowed shoulder, but the figure in the chair did not move. Then Saada's voice hung on the warm evening air,

"Father, why don't you speak to me?"

"Don't wake him," John said, following her in. "The night is very close. He is fast asleep."

"But look! He is different—somehow. Oh, John, what is the matter? He does not speak to me. And his eyes are open. I—I—"

Williams caught at her arm and drew her gently aside. Then he bent over the huddled-up form and lifted Sheikh Medene's fingers. They were marble cold.

"I think he has fainted," he muttered, lowering his ear to the grey lips. A tense silence, then reaching out to support Saada, he said very tenderly, "You must be brave, dear; your father is dead."

The dark eyes widened in horror.

"Dead! Oh, what shall we do?" she cried, and hiding her face against his shoulder, her body was shaken with sobs. Tenderly he led her to a chair and made her sit down. Then he bent once more over the motionless figure. A white sheet of paper was gripped in the nerveless hand. He took it mechanically, and peered into the pallid face, peaceful in death.

"He has been dead some little while. His forehead is quite cold. I believe you told me he suffered with his heart?"

She looked at him through a mist.

"Yes, his heart was weak. He must have received a shock. What is that letter?"

Williams passed it over.

"It looks like a communication from a lawyer. He was probably reading it when he passed away."

"We needn't look further for the cause of death," Saada said after a little while. "The shock of that letter killed him. Read it. You will understand then something of the character of the man I married."

It was the first time she had shown intense bitterness since John had won her confidence. He could understand exactly how she was feeling, for the letter was about as cruel as anything could be. Lance had instructed Strangeways to deal with the matter, and Strangeways had written abruptly and concisely, without the slightest trace of sympathy, to say that having received instructions from their client, Mr. Lance Railsford, who had entered into a marriage which he very much regretted, they were prepared to make through Sheikh Medene an annual allowance in respect of his daughter, on condition that the said daughter made no attempt whatever either to see, molest, or communicate with her husband.

Williams came to the end in a white heat of passion. Forgotten for a moment was the dead man in the chair, the grey-faced, horror-stricken girl crushed by the weight of this great catastrophe; forgotten everything, save that somewhere in the world was a brute in human form who had

wantonly brought suffering on the woman he himself loved.

"My God! I'll kill him for this!" he ground out savagely, striding up and down the room, his hands clenched. "If I have to follow him to the ends of the earth . . . I'll get him . . . and make him pay." Then, his anger cooling in the presence of death, he ceased abruptly, and came to where Saada sat silent and heartbroken with her grief.

His hand touched her bowed head and passed to her shoulder; she slid from the chair into the shelter of his arms, and on his bosom sobbed out the full measure of her pain. For a long time he held her thus, crushing her fast, clasping her soft body to his own, knowing that for this one brief hour of sadness God had given her to him.

"Always I will love and care for you, little Saada," he whispered, burying his face in her hair. "Every hour of my life shall be lived for you. Will you let me care for you?"

With a shudder she drew herself free and placed her fingers on his lips.

"Dear, we mustn't think or talk like that. Oh, I know I hurt you . . . I see the pain in your dear kind eyes. Love and sympathy are prompting you to say things which later you will regret."

"Yes, I know," he returned miserably. "Whatever happens, we mustn't lose sight of the unalterable fact. You are still married, and as long as you live you belong to him."

She sank down on the floor at his feet, and, with

his arm laid lovingly upon her shoulder, her small fingers closed upon his hand, and her eyes, full of mournful regrets, were fixed on the pallid face of the dead man.

“If only he could have been spared to me I could have borne the rest,” she said in a lifeless whisper “He was always my best friend . . . a mother as well as a father to me; so gentle and kind and true. There was never an hour but I was in his thoughts; never an hour when I ceased to think of him. Yet, because he was an Arab, my husband despised him. John,” looking up at him, “You don’t think God meant this to be?”

“I don’t, dear,” he answered, gently caressing the thick abundance of her hair. “We are all His creatures, made in His own likeness . . . and though at times,” a shadowed smile softened the grimness of his mouth, “some of us defile the image, He cares for all. Your father was as much to Him as the noblest white man who ever breathed.”

“You do believe that . . . in spite of his faith?” she questioned eagerly.

He inclined his head reverently.

“His Allah was your God and mine—no more, no less. We are all His, sinner and saint, black and white. Should I think less or cease to care because you are an Arab girl?”

For an instant the impulse was strong upon her to tell him the story of her birth. And yet perhaps it were better never known. No good purpose could be served by telling it now. In a little while

this man and she must go their separate ways. . . .

“You will always be my friend, John?” Her hand slid trustingly into his again.

“Always your friend—loving you, through sunshine and storm, to life’s end,” he answered, touching her warm flesh with his lips. “The thought of you will lift me up and carry me on, perhaps through dark and dangerous days, but always towards the light. We stand on the edge of a gulf . . . you and I, Saada. On the far side I see happiness . . . my happiness and yours together, not in this world, but in the world beyond. Below . . . I see dark places through which you and I must pass—alone. But one day we shall come together . . . is it wrong to tell you this?”

“I know you are trying to comfort me,” she muttered brokenly.

“If the knowledge of my love is comfort, then God will surely forgive my comforting you,” he answered. “I am not one of those who think happiness should be seized at any cost. You taught me that lesson long ago.”

He looked into her brave eyes, meeting his so directly, and went on,

“We shall be often lonely. My way will lie apart from yours. But always, dear, you will feel you can come to me.”

He spoke out of the fulness of his soul, knowing that not only did he worship her with all the strength of his strong body and vigorous mind, but

that she was the one woman in all the world to him. Looking back through all the dreariness of the past, he knew that he had lived only for this hour, during which he had found at last the treasure he had searched for. And he had found her too late. She knew it too. It was in her eyes, her voice, the clinging touch of the soft hands that reached up and took his face between them.

"Try to help me too . . . not to forget," she pleaded. "You have been tempted, and you know the way. I—I am so weak and miserable. Wherever I look, John, I see only the darkness ahead."

"We must be very brave and very strong, dear," he said again. "The temptation is to feel we are justified: you especially, because of the wrong done you. The man to whom you are bound has killed your father."

"And because of that I am learning to hate him," she cried, with startling vehemence. "A little while ago, when he sent me that cruel letter, I told myself he had no power to hurt me any more. Now he has done this cruel thing, and I can never, never forgive him."

The look he gave her checked the furious current of her words.

"Men strike in the dark and wound in unexpected places. Railsford never meant to do all this. The time must come when he will realize the full measure of his guilt. A little while ago I would have killed him cheerfully—have gone to the far ends of the earth to make him pay. I have

learned—this last half-hour—that all our lives, yours, his, and mine, are in the hands of One who will mould them to His will."

She regarded him with a sudden questioning. "John, what makes you speak like that?"

"What makes me?" His lips lifted in a slow smile. "You are telling yourself that once I was so weak. I was—until love came . . . your love for me . . . a new and wonderful power which just crept into my poor life and made it altogether different. Love, the love of a good woman like you, has worked a miracle in me. I am what I am, or ever shall be, because of your love for me. Don't you understand?"

"Yes, I am beginning to understand," she answered softly. "It helps me ever so much when I am tempted to be despondent. Everything isn't yet lost, John. Something very big and grand has come to both of us—to help us through the darkness."

She rose, looking wonderfully composed, and after kissing the dead man's forehead, drew the white folds of his silk robe over his face. Then she turned again to John with a clear, understanding gaze. Looking at her thus in silence a long minute, he read her purpose and her promise . . . to be true, though they loved each other, to the best that was in them.

"We will do our utmost always, Saada. It won't be easy, and when we are far away from each other the longing to meet will sweep over us again

and again. But through it all we shall know, we always have—our love."

He took her hand, and in silence they passed out together.

There was a good deal to be done . . . officials, both native and European, to be dealt with, the funeral arrangements to be made. John was glad now that Theodore Snitch had insisted on his taking the full week off. He threw his whole energy into making everything as easy as possible for Saada.

The sheikh was to be buried with the full rites of the faith in which he had always lived and died. The interment took place on the Wednesday, after a brief but dignified service in the Great Mosque of El Bouira, a beautiful building dating from the time of Abou-ben-Mohammed El Aghlab. Then, the coffin draped in rich hangings and carried by bearers, a procession was formed, and walked to the dirge of sad music to the Arab cemetery beyond the town. Both John and Saada followed, picking their way through the numerous ornamental graves, richly decorated with blue tiles and surmounted by a carved turban or a gilded crescent. The coffin was lowered, the imám read the committal service and recited a few portions from the Koran; then to the beat of *bendirs* and the wailing of the mourners, the party returned to the town.

Saada had already made her plans—to sell the furnishings of the villa, to obtain release from the

agreement which Lance had entered into, and with Yakoub to return to Tunis.

"I must be there to see my father's affairs wound up," she explained to John. "He had a large house, although how he has left it I don't know."

"But you must promise, if you have any difficulty, to send for me," he insisted.

"If I feel I need you I will send," she told him.

He remained at the hotel until the moment for her departure came. They talked a little while till the Transatlantique company's car was ready to take her on the first stage of the journey, as far as Biskra. Then, heavy of heart, she took leave of him and strove to fix her thoughts on the new life that lay before her.

CHAPTER XVIII

MUHAMMED BEY

ALONE in the once stately palace home near the Rue Sidi Abdallah, Saada found her hands more than full. As she anticipated, the sheikh's affairs were terribly involved . . . so much so that time and again she was tempted to send for John. The thought, however, of the good work he was doing under Theodore Snitch, and the progress he was making, stayed her: with the faithful Yakoub helping her, she faced the difficulties in a spirit of calm resolution.

One of her first tasks was purely personal . . . to write to Lance's lawyers informing them of the sheikh's death, and to tell them that under no circumstances would she consent to receive a penny of her husband's money. More, she returned a full statement of affairs at El Bouira, and enclosed the agreement release with the balance received after all claims had been met.

When this was done she felt more free. At least she was no longer beholden to the man who had deserted her.

While outstanding matters in connection with the sheikh's affairs remained to be settled, she had

time to examine the papers which the sheikh had left her. She found among them all the records necessary to establish her identity: the birth and marriage certificates of her mother and father, the certificate of her own birth, and the signed and witnessed statement of the sheikh himself. There were, in addition, besides several articles of jewellery bearing the Denton family crest and monogram, a coloured photograph of herself, taken when a baby, definitely recognizable by the tiny birthmark on the left side of her throat.

These papers she sealed up and took to the offices of the British Consul in the Place de la Bourse beyond the Port de France.

An examination of Sheikh Medene's accounts revealed a sad and deplorable state of affairs. They went back to the time when he had sent her to her first expensive school in Paris, and covered a period of five years . . . up to the day when the impossibility of raising further sums had forced him to write and say that her schooldays must come to a close. Saada went through them, sad at heart—the record of her foster-father's generous unselfishness. From that expense, having raised the necessary money at an extortionate rate of interest, he appeared never to have recovered.

The house itself, once a store of stately treasures, was heavily mortgaged to an Arab merchant in the Souk-el-Chehiaa. As day followed day, and Saada met and dealt with fresh hordes of creditors—buying them off as best she could by making over

the rich furnishings and hangings—the position changed from bad to worse.

One afternoon she returned from a walk in the Belvedere Gardens at the far end of the long, straight Avenue de Paris, her sole relaxation after a week's unremitting work, to see walking in the courtyard at Yakoub's side a tall, dignified-looking Arab who was speaking with a great deal of animation.

As she passed under the cool colonnaded arch, hung with baskets of swinging flowers, Yakoub hurried towards her, and said,

“Miss Saada, the Sheikh Muhammed Bey has called to pay his respects, and he begs to be allowed to see you in private to discuss a matter of urgent business.”

Saada glanced across at the big *bernoused* figure idly watching the goldfish darting to and fro in the fountain basin.

“Muhammed Bey?” she repeated, a shadow settling on her face. “Isn’t he our biggest creditor, Yakoub—the merchant who has threatened to sell us up unless all his claims are settled immediately?”

Yakoub inclined his head.

“Indeed so, Miss Saada, a wealthy and powerful Arab, but withal a man renowned for his charity and good works. He wishes to explain the letter which you received from the Arab lawyers this morning.”

“Then I will see him,” she said, passing between

the twisted marble columns into a three-sided doorless room which opened directly on to the courtyard. "I will receive him here."

Yakoub went out to acquaint the visitor and hurried off to prepare coffee. Saada rose and began to draw off her gloves, as the good-looking Arab bowed and greeted her with a friendly salutation.

"Your good servant has doubtless acquainted you with the object of my visit," Muhammed Bey said, sinking down on the pile of cushions which the girl set for him. "I come to offer my apologies, Miss Medene, for the harsh tone of the letter which my lawyers sent to you yesterday. I did not see it until this morning. I regret exceedingly it was ever sent."

Saada smothered a sigh and smiled bravely.

"It was only businesslike, Muhammed Bey," she said quietly. "I have discovered that my father"—she had decided always to speak of the sheikh as her father—"owed you large sums of money. You are only one among several, although I agree you are the largest creditor. What do you wish me to do?"

The Arab stroked his glossy black beard, and all the while his sombre dark eyes were fixed on her intently. His voice was very pleasant as he answered,

"I have learned something, Miss Medene, of the unfortunate position in which you find yourself. Your father died heavily in debt. Honouring his

name and memory as you do, you are naturally anxious he should escape, even death, the greatest stigma that can be attached to an ancient and honoured family. You wish to see all his debts honourably met."

"Indeed I do," she said earnestly. "But the claims are so many that the task appears impossible. I have already sold all the carpets and the bulk of the furniture; the house, as you know, is mortgaged . . . and your account still remains to be paid."

Muhammed Bey toyed with the string of amber beads about his neck.

"I should esteem it an honour, out of respect to your dead father, to remit the debt. But that I know, Miss Medene, you would never agree to. I have called, therefore, to make another suggestion. You have heard of me as a rich merchant in this town. In the *souks* many of the largest shops are owned by me. My caravans travel by all the routes across North Africa—from Rabat to Fez and Algiers, from Tunis to Biskra, and some across Arabia even as far as Jeddah, the gate to Mecca, and to distant Baghdad. Such a business, you realize, involves a great deal of work."

"And necessitates that every one pays you to the full," she interposed, quite mistaking his intention.

He smiled genially.

"That, of course, is important. But what is even more important to me is to possess an effi-

cient right hand. I have just lost my secretary—
young Sukri Chemal, who has gone to Sfax to
start a business of his own. I need some one with
a knowledge of French and English as well as of
our own tongue. In consideration of my aban-
doning all claims on your father's estate, will you
come and work for me?"

To Saada it meant a great deal to see her foster-
father's name cleared of the reproach which threat-
ened it. She rose and took a bundle of papers
from a nacre-topped coffer and began to read rap-
idly.

"I believe," she said, "that apart from your
claim, Muhammed Bey, all the other creditors
could be paid. I think I could do as you wish—
for a time, at any rate."

"Of course you would be comfortably housed and
well cared for under my roof," the Arab continued.
"I should pay you a salary commensurate with
your needs, and when the debt is wiped off—every-
thing would depend on your usefulness to me—we
should arrange other terms. I assure you, Miss
Medene, you would not find me ungenerous."

"You would wish me to live in your house?"
Saada mused.

"It would be better so, because that would save
you much money. Hotels in Tunis are expensive
just now. You would share the apartments with
my two wives. Like you, they are both young,
and enjoy a considerable measure of freedom. I
have a fine house in the city, and another at Ham-

mam-el-Lif. However," with a wave of his richly-jewelled hand, "perhaps you would like to think over the proposition and consult your friends about it."

"I have no friends in Tunis," she replied quickly, "and I don't think the matter requires consideration. It is very kind of you to make such a suggestion. I am willing to agree to your terms, and to come whenever you need me."

Muhammed Bey inclined his turbaned head.

"I am honoured by your complaisance, mademoiselle," he said, drawing the folds of his *berhouse* about him as he rose. "If you can place your services at my disposal, from the beginning of next month, I shall indeed be glad."

He kissed his own hand as a sign that, so far as he was concerned, the bargain would be strictly adhered to, and thanking her again, passed a blessing upon the house and the shelter it had given him, drained the cup of coffee and went out—a majestic figure—into the white sunlight of the afternoon.

CHAPTER XIX

GREAT POSSESSIONS

ALONG summer had lingered on into an early autumn, and on the wide stretches of broadland around Lance Railsford's stately home a few cruising yachts were still afloat enjoying the bright October days. Winter, however, arrived with unexpected suddenness; the bright-hued flowers which decked the dykes and riversides vanished, and within a week the marshes were buried under a white coverlet of snow. The drear time of the year had come with a vengeance. On the flats and seashore grey-backed Kentishmen joined the ringed plovers and sanderlings, a certain sign that the cold weather would last.

For the young squire of Landringham a solitary existence set in. The heavy snowfall had made untraversable the highways across the marshes; the long days through, the steely river was blurred by Arctic winds which swept the drear misty wastes and gave to the surrounding countryside the appearance of Russian steppes. There were no frost fairies at work, diamonding the catkins and pine-needles with crystal rime; feathery reed plumes, brave when ice-coated, bent downcast heads to the biting breeze. The carrs and spinneys

were mere sedge-traps; even the marshman with his old-fashioned muzzle-loading gun, tired of waiting for golden plover to flight to the uplands, sought the warmth of his own fireside. Black winter had placed a death-hand upon the land.

In the panelled library Lance sat alone, every now and then turning a watchful eye on the huge octagonal dial of the Parliament clock. As it showed the hour of seven, he touched a bell and his man appeared.

"Tell Hayden to have the car ready for the station within ten minutes," he said irritably. "General Bailey has wired to say he will arrive by the seven-thirty instead of the ten o'clock. Thank you; that is all."

As the door closed behind the silent-footed Bates, Railsford dropped back into the depths of the spacious chair and relapsed once more into a moody silence. A year had changed him. No longer was the boyish looking face bright with exuberance; deep lines of discontent sagged about a peevish mouth; the black hair at his temples had thinned visibly, and in the shadowed eyes was often a look of utter dejection. The truth was that wealth and idleness had spoiled him. He was never a keen sportsman, so had found no pleasure either in sailing or fishing the waterways in summer, or in shooting his own covers through the winter. He had become an aimless, purposeless man, without ambition and without amusements.

He had thought that Landringham, with its man-

ifold attractions, would fill each hour of his life with enjoyment; he was learning already that great possessions carry great responsibilities. The care of the vast estate bothered him; he found little interest either in his own position or that of his tenantry. The social lure, upon which his mother had lain such a stress, had proved a disillusionment. In spite of his wealth he had made few friends. In some mysterious manner the news of his ill-starred marriage had become fairly general public property: people wanted to know why Land-ringham lacked its mistress, and receiving no satisfactory answer, held aloof. The effect upon a nature so self-conscious as Lance's was quickly apparent and he became an austere, silent man.

He was pleased when Bailey wrote to him from Marseille saying that, having finished with the expedition, he was returning to England and hoped they would meet in town. By return Lance had written asking him to put in the first free week-end with him.

A little before eight the car returned, bringing the visitor—the same genial, time-worn soldier of fortune, as free of speech and easy of manner as when Lance had last seen him at El Bouira.

“Life has wrought wonderful changes for you, my boy,” he remarked half an hour later, when they stood together by the library fire, waiting for the dinner-gong to sound. “How are you enjoying your new and wonderful inheritance?”

The younger man turned on his companion a look of utter weariness.

"To tell you the truth, General, I'm dead sick of it all," he remarked sullenly. "I was turning things over in my mind before you arrived . . . and I've almost decided to shut the beastly place up and to get back to North Africa. However, you look tired and hungry: there goes the gong. We'll talk about it after dinner."

"Let's take our cigars to the library, it's warmer there," Railsford said an hour later. "I hate this huge barn, large enough to dine fifty people. Why my uncle didn't sell the place in his lifetime, instead of burdening me with it, I can't make out. I'd have done far better with the interest on the money."

"Family pride, my boy," laughed Bailey, slapping his host genially on the shoulder. "The old man evidently hoped to see the family title revived in your person. I'm sorry if things aren't going as well as you could wish. What's the trouble?"

"My mother, for one thing," Lance answered glumly. "She's wintering in the Riviera, and between the intervals of losing much money and winning a little, spends her time in sending me insulting letters."

"I'm sorry to hear this," Bailey said feelingly. "I hope the estrangement is only temporary. You were always such big pals. It seems a pity for mother and son to be at loggerheads."

Railsford emitted a harsh laugh.

“We’ve never been anything else since I took possession of the place. My uncle, you know, left her two thousand a year. She didn’t think it enough: thought she ought to have at least ten thousand out of the estate . . . and I jibbed.”

“Naturally! An estate like this must be very expensive to keep up.”

“It wasn’t that altogether. It was the spirit which prompted the demand. Her point was that if Uncle Hugh had known I was engaged or married to an Arab girl he wouldn’t have left me a penny. She tactfully kept the news from him, and consequently argues that she is as much entitled to a big share of the fortune as I am.”

Bailey laughed heartily.

“Sounds almost like family blackmail, Lance. Of course you didn’t give way?”

He negatived the suggestion sharply.

“On principle, no. Besides, I don’t approve of the way she is spending what she has. She indulges in every luxury and extravagance, and has a perfect mania for gambling. Before she went away she used to get up bridge parties; they began at eleven in the morning and finished God knows what time of the night, until the house became a veritable bear-garden of greedy, haggling, quarrelsome old women. At last I had to tell her I’d have no more of it. I cleared the whole lot out, and she went off in a huff to the south of France, since when her first year’s two thousand has melted into

thin air and she's set herself to pledge my credit for more."

"Rather unpleasant, these family jars, eh?" Bailey sipped thoughtfully at his wine while his glance roved over the dignified riches of the room. "However, you've a very comfy shop here, and no doubt you get plenty of quiet amusement out of it."

"Amusement!" Lance yawned. "I'm bored stiff. I hate the people and I loathe the country-side. Sport doesn't interest me at all; club life tires me, and altogether I'm fed up with the whole business. That's why, before dinner I said I thought of getting back to Africa."

The General sat up, his curiosity aroused.

"Why?"

"Life is more free. There you can do as you like; here you can't. Every action is noted and commented upon. In an Eastern land it is so different."

"You didn't find it so very free and easy in El Bouira, dear boy. By the by, what happened to that native wife of yours? A great pity you ever married. You might have found a nice English girl and settled down here quite happily. That's what you want . . . to found a family. You've money, position, everything—and yet, I suppose," turning a thoughtful glance on the crackling cedar logs, "it's quite out of the question."

A regretful sigh drifted between them. Railsford, leaning back, seemed to be lost in a study of the richly-carved oak ceiling. Faint whirls of

gossamer-blue smoke drifted lazily in the warm air and took fancy shapes until he could have sworn that they formed the outline of a face wondrously beautiful yet pitifully sad.

He shook himself and came to ground again, to see Bailey regarding him with a strangely insistent stare. He was trying to frame an answer when the other broke in with,

“There’s no possibility of getting that wretched marriage annulled, I suppose? Money, you know, Lance, can work most things. Isn’t there a loophole, somewhere, on the question of religion? It shouldn’t be difficult to make out that as she was a Mahomedan and you a Christian, and the ceremony was performed only according to Christian rites, there was a legal flaw. Lawyers are such plausible beggars these days; they manage to drive a coach and horses through most things; couldn’t you——”

“I’ve no wish to get the marriage annulled,” he said wearily. “If I could, I shouldn’t want to marry any one else.”

Bailey straightened and smirched his shirt-front with a fall of ash.

“You don’t mean to say . . . you regret having left her?”

The other stirred uneasily beneath the questioning look.

“I don’t know what I regret,” he replied evasively. “Sometimes the feeling comes over me that I’ve been an awful brute. I try to put her out of

my mind, but I can't. She's always with me, General. For days I sit here alone, long hours together, without seeing a soul; I don't want any one near me . . . and my thoughts go back to the happiest time in my life . . . the engagement days which we spent together in Tunis."

"My dear fellow——"

Lance pushed back his chair and, rising, set his shoulders against the oak mantelpiece.

"It's true," he admitted. "She just haunts me. I see her everywhere, and in the long evenings, when this great house is silent as the grave, I hear her voice . . . and I tell myself . . . I can't live without her."

The older man laughed satirically.

"Nonsense, nonsense. You need a change, that's all. It's foolish to repine. For one thing, you couldn't bring her here; for another, if she has any self-respect—and from what I've heard she possesses a good deal—you'd only meet with a snub for your pains. My advice is—don't complicate an already delicate situation. You appear to have trouble enough on hand over your mother."

Railsford looked grim.

"Frankly, mother doesn't distress me over much," he said, passing his hand reflectively over his smooth-shaven chin. "She is deliberately laying up her own store of trouble and must abide by the consequences. But what annoys me is the fact that her influence started a heap of trouble for me."

"In what way, Lance?"

The admission seemed more than a little cowardly. He made it, all the same.

"Well, to begin with, I don't believe I should ever have dreamt of throwing Saada over if it hadn't been for her. She was always driving home the danger of a mixed marriage. I went into the engagement happily enough. I believe the marriage would have been a success, if only I had given it a chance."

Bailey's grey head moved deliberately from side to side.

"I don't, Lance. Your mother was right. Besides, if you blame her you should blame me too. I, perhaps, did as much as any one to dissuade you. My only regret was, I couldn't influence you in time. The news of the wedding upset me very much indeed. Now, if I were you," becoming suddenly animated, "I should just pack up—that is, if you're feeling fed up with this place, and heaven alone knows why you should be—and clear off . . . anywhere, except to North Africa. Try the South Seas, for example. At this time of the year they're perfectly delightful."

"No!" Lance spoke with vigour, "if I go anywhere it will be to North Africa. It's a strange thing, General, but one associates certain places with one's happy memories. When I think of Tunis now I recall the gorgeous sunny hours when Saada and I were just together. I mean to go to Tunis and see if I cannot catch something of the

spirit of the past. I shall know, when I get there and visit some of the old familiar spots, whether she is essential to my future as I am beginning to think she is. If so, I shall simply take my courage in both hands—and ask her to come back again."

"Of course she'll do nothing of the sort," Bailey snorted.

"I'm not so sure," the other answered confidently. "She must have had a pretty rotten time, poor girl. She turned down the offer I made through the lawyers; said she'd never touch a penny of my money . . . and goodness knows, the old man has little enough to play with! My impression is that time has softened the blow—there's no doubt my going was a dreadful shock—and that if she gets the chance to live with me as my wife, especially under the present changed conditions, she'll take it."

General Bailey smiled to himself. As a keen observer of life he possessed a fairly sound estimate of women. And he certainly showed a shrewd opinion of his young friend's character.

"I see what it is, Lance," he ventured, flicking the ash from his cigar with a quiet movement of his little finger. "During the time you have boxed yourself up here alone you've given yourself up to thinking about your wife; and you are deluding yourself into imagining you made a colossal mistake, which can now be put right by the stroke of a pen. You like a man to have the courage of his own opinions, don't you?"

Lance looked uneasy.

"Of course; I value yours very highly, General."

"Very well, then. I'll be quite candid, because I believe it will help you over a great difficulty. I advised you to break your engagement to a coloured girl. However, you took the fatal step, married her and then broke away when it was too late. Now the remembrance of that is bothering you—and you seem to think you have only to write to her, and she will consent to pick up the broken threads again."

"Something tells me I could be very happy with her," he muttered. "I know I did wrong . . . and that's why I'm not enjoying this fine inheritance. I really did love her in a funny sort of way—only I allowed myself to be influenced when I oughtn't to have been. My idea is either to go out or to send and ask her to rejoin me."

"Both of which courses are doomed to failure," replied Bailey sagely. "You can't right this particular sort of wrong in that way. She knows you had to choose between her and money—and money won. Very well! Her answer, in so many words, would be, 'You made your decision; get on with it.' And get on with it you must."

The troubled look in Railsford's eyes was deepening. He had longed for an opportunity to unburden himself of the load of misery and regret which lay so heavily on his soul; now that the chance had come, the best advice his friend could give him was to make up his mind to abide by the consequences of his sin.

He turned sharply in the middle of the room, his lined face tragically sad. But in his voice was a note of eager, passionate wistfulness.

"I'd give anything to get her back!" he said breathlessly. "You don't know the hell of torture I've been through in this great desolate place. I've no companions, no interests. Money means nothing to me. I've lost all pleasure in spending on myself. My mother has failed me. I'm alone . . . alone . . . and in all the world no one cares what becomes of me."

Bailey tapped the toe of his patent leather shoe irritably against the fender rail.

"Tut! tut! Lance, you're not a child. You did what you did of your own free will. The price is —you are separated from your wife. The girl who will refuse a monetary consideration when she is hard pressed is not the sort to let any man play bat and shuttlecock with her heart. If you want to make some amends, try a roundabout method of making provision for her; but, for Heaven's sake, don't court a rebuff by trying to call an impossible truce. You're still young, and very impressionable. In time you'll learn to forget all about her, and then . . ."

"I shall never forget," he replied, turning away. "Conscience won't allow a fellow to forget some things. Sooner or later they come home to roost. However, we won't talk any more about it—tonight, at any rate. What do you say to playing me a hundred up?"

They adjourned to the billiards-room and stayed to a late hour. A little before midnight Lance showed Bailey to his room; then, turning quietly away, he went down to the library and seated himself at his desk. The deep silence into which the house had sunk was an aid to his thoughts. He wrote feverishly, out of the fulness of his heart . . . a letter full of weariness and bitter regrets, a plea to be forgiven, and to be allowed to return again. Not knowing where to find Saada, he addressed it to her at her father's house in Tunis, and posting it in the box in the hall, crept wearily up to his room.

CHAPTER XX

GOD'S GIFT

IN the service of Muhammed Bey—kind of heart and always courteous—Saada found a happiness she never dared hope for. The rich, middle-aged merchant became almost a second foster-father. With his two young wives, Nakhla and Zadia, eagerly seconding his endeavours, he set himself to make her happy and comfortable in her new surroundings. From Monday to Friday she worked in his large store behind the Souk-el-Attarine, spending the week-end at his palatial out-town residence in beautiful Hammam-el-Lif. Here, on the sun-kissed shores of the Gulf of Tunis, beneath the fir-clad slopes of the mountain—a spot delightfully immortalized in Flaubert's "Salambo," the book which Theodore Snitch was always raving about—Saada found pleasant distractions from the sadness which her husband's cruelty had flung across her life . . . through the summer days, bathing in the blue waters of the bay, and long walks in the welcome forest glade. There was a deal of gaiety, too, in the luxurious gardens of the Casino, and frequent excursions by car and carriage to such delightful spots as Hammamet and Ksar-er-Choula, where for long hours

together she would interest herself wandering alone through the wonderful Roman ruins.

At such times her thoughts were often with John, still working splendidly at his arduous duties in the sun-baked sands of Beni el Ourit. Snitch wrote regularly once a month telling of the many amazing discoveries, and of John's progress. He had made, and saved, a good deal of money; no longer did he shrink from his fellows under an alien name. To all the world he was henceforth John Forrester, the man who had made good.

Saada was delighted with the news. John she knew, would glory in her freedom from care, even as she rejoiced in his emancipation.

Towards the end of the year the fine weather, which had held up since the previous March, broke suddenly, and the season of storms, accompanied by fierce downpours of rain, set in. For days together, the Marsa Hill and the craggy summit of the Djebel-Bou-Kornein were blotted out by rolling banks of mist, driving in from the sea. The wind swung round to the north, gathering force day by day, until the seas were breaking upon the harbour-works at La Golette with a force which threatened to sweep them away. A bitter cold succeeded the balmy warmth of clear, sunshiny days; the streets, winnowed by icy blasts which drove to shelter the native population, were desolate and deserted. In the last forty years Tunis had known no such experience. Business was almost at a standstill; so much so that Muhammed Bey decided to shut down

for two months and remove with his family to Biskra, where the sun always shines. Saada was to go too, and was in the throes of clearing up her office work when an interruption occurred to change her plans. Into her small room, behind the spacious, low-ceilinged apartment given over to the display of rich hangings and valuable carpets, stepped Yakoub, holding a letter.

"For you, m'am," he said, bowing respectfully. "I apologizes for de fat delay, but it hab been all roun' dis yeah town after bein' taken to the Rue Sidi Abdallah."

Saada went a little white when she recognized Lance's handwriting. The past had been buried so long and so effectively that she had hoped nothing would ever revive it. Yet in a moment everything was brought back by the sincerity breathed in every line of her husband's pitiful appeal. He had written :

"No words of mine can ever describe the torment of suffering into which my cruelty to you has plunged me. At last I have learned the great lesson to which I so blindly shut my eyes—that in all the world love is the only prize worth striving for. Your love for me I killed long ago; but mine for you still lives, though God knows, often enough, in the selfishness of my heart, I tried to crush it out to make room for other and less worthy interests. One by one, all have failed, and weakly I fall back on the only hope left to me . . . that you, dear, whom I so cruelly wronged, will try to find it in your soul to forgive and forget. More I dare not

ask—but to be with you once again, just for an hour, to look upon your sweet face, to gather perhaps a single word of hope from your lips and to see the light of compassion in your eyes. Grant me this, though you no longer love me; give me the chance to work out my salvation . . . and at the end let me place in your dear hands all I have worth offering, a broken but repentant heart.

“I send this from Marseilles, by the Transatlantique *Duc D'Aumale*, which is just leaving, but too full to give me accommodation, so I shall cross by the Navigation Mixte steamer, the *Alphonse Daudet*, on Thursday. Arrived at Tunis, I shall at once set inquiries on foot to trace you. . . .”

Saada turned to Yakoub with a weary smile.

“Thank you; there is no answer,” she said.

When the man had gone, Saada put on her coat and went out. Usually she lunched at a café in the Avenue de France, a small place kept by an Englishwoman, at this season of the year almost deserted. Here she could be alone to face the stupendous shock which Lance's letter had caused. Of course he would find her quite easily; long since the details of her luckless marriage had become common property in Tunis.

Would it be wiser to meet him or to go away? She knew that her heart was dead, that long since all affection for him had been consumed, leaving nothing but the cold ashes of contempt behind. Useless for both of them to try to revive a past better forgotten.

She sat down in the deserted room, waiting for Mrs. Mason to appear. In the wide street without, the double line of plane trees, stripped bare by the gale, which now had raged with unabating fury more than a week, waved bone-like limbs to the grey sky, from which thrashed down a ceaseless flood of rain. Deeper than the dull roar of the wind was the far-off boom of the giant breakers careering in headlong fury across the lake and hurling themselves with shattering force upon the concrete works of the harbour.

"Mrs. Railsford, you've heard the dreadful news?"

Saada awoke from a depressed reverie to see the lady proprietor standing in the curtained doorway. In her hand she carried a special edition of the *Dépêche Tunisien*.

"One of the big steamers is on fire at sea. She was to have arrived early this morning. You can read what little news there is while I get your lunch ready. There you are . . . the *Alphonse Daudet*—ablaze from stem to stem twenty miles north-east of Ras el Abiad; my husband thinks they'll try to beach her at Porto Farina."

Saada had risen, a look of terror on her face.

"My husband is on the *Alphonse Daudet*," she said swiftly. "I had a letter from him this morning."

Mrs. Mason became instantly sympathetic.

"Then you'd better get down to the harbour. They'll have news at the company's office on the

quayside. At ten o'clock the ship's wireless was still working. . . ."

Saada waited to hear no more, but turned into the full welter of the storm. In a moment it seemed the city had wakened to life, for dense crowds of natives and Europeans were streaming from the Avenue de Paris, the Avenue de Carthage, and through the Port de France, all joining in the Avenue Jules Ferry.

A motor-ambulance turned the corner of the Avenue de la République and made off in the direction of Melassine. Saada heard some one whisper the words "Civil Hospital!" and a moment later understood, for between a number of mounted gendarmes shrouded forms on stretchers were being hurried away.

Her steps quickened to a run past the custom house sheds. The Basin Principal was lined a score deep, many shouting and gesticulating wildly as small boats breasted the immense waves, only to vanish a second later in the trough of the sea.

She heard a young American talking to an English chemist.

"The Alphonse Daudet has been burned to the water's edge. They tried to beach her . . . but failed . . . the few survivors put off in the boats . . . a good many have been saved . . . explosion . . ."

She waited to hear no more, but shouldered her way through the press to the company's office on the quay. The harassed clerk could tell her little.

"I am sorry, madam, but we have no accurate

details yet. We believe a large number of lives have unfortunately been lost. The survivors are now coming in. Some of them are being taken to the Tunisia Palace Hotel. You might go there first. Here is a list of those already sent to the Civil Hospital."

Lance's name was not among them. Saada turned away, sick at heart. In the hour of suffering all the bitterness of the past had gone. She saw mangled, lifeless figures lifted from the smashed boats . . . scanned each swollen, disfigured face, and turning her back on the dreadful scene, hastened to the Tunisia Palace.

In the vestibule a ship's doctor stood, his face blackened and his clothes sodden.

"You have come off the *Alphonse Daudet*?" she ventured breathlessly.

He bowed politely.

"I am one of the fortunate survivors, madam. Had you a friend on board?"

"Yes—Mr. Lance Railsford," she explained.

He looked confused, and half turned away.

"Monsieur Railsford is here. He has just been brought in. You must be brave, madam; there is no hope of his recovery." She moved at his side mechanically as he mounted the stairs. "It was an act of supreme courage, madam, such as one might expect from the brave English. He returned to the vessel when he might have saved himself—to bring off a Lascar fireman. *Mon*

Dieu! it was madness, but ver' grand . . . the ship was blazing fore and aft . . . but for a poor black man this noble fellow gave his life. You had better not see him yet."

She raised her face, radiant with a calm courage . . . her eyes full of appeal.

"Please take me to him: he is my husband."

In the vestibule below fresh cases were being brought in. French and native doctors moved silently to and fro. Saada went into the big room. On the tables and settees bandaged men and horribly burned women writhed in agony. Her glance swept the terrible picture . . . she saw Lance, stripped to the waist, supported by two doctors. The lacerated body was dark with the scorch of flame and smoke. She went to him and lifted his lifeless hand.

"It is his wife," her companion said . . . and they moved aside.

"Lance!" she called. A shudder passed through the discoloured face; the fixed, awful eyes made a desperate effort to focus. . . . For an instant her sobbing cry must have reached him, for a glimmer of consciousness lit the sightless orbs, but died away as the light fades from the electric wires in a bulb that has been snapped out.

"Lance, I have come to you!" she cried again, and dropping on her knees, wound both her arms about him and drew the drooping head down to her breast.

Light was failing, but in some dim fashion he seemed to understand, for she caught the whisper of his last breath.

"To forgive?" he asked.

Out of the unfathomable wells of her great heart she gave her answer,

"Yes, dear—to forgive and forget."

His lip lifted in a fleeting tortured smile . . . brief, ineffable . . . the happiness of their last meeting . . . and with his disfigured face hid upon her bosom, his tired life passed out into the light of a fuller and brighter day.

John and Saada stood together on a little ridge raised by the desert winds, looking out over trackless miles of sand, and in the eyes of both was the light of a great happiness. A year had passed since Saada's weary feet had followed Lance Railsford to his last resting-place in the little Protestant cemetery behind the Bab Carthagina of Tunis.

"You think you will be content to spend your honeymoon with me in the desert?" Forrester asked, looking down on the radiant, smiling face.

"Where else, dear?" Saada answered. "We shall love the sun and the deep silences."

"And the nearness of your own people."

"The land which my foster-father loved," she said softly. "At least . . . I shall always call him my father. John . . . I haven't yet told you."

"Told me what, darling?" he asked, slipping his arm about her slim waist. "What is there to tell?

Surely my little Arab wife has no secrets from her husband?"

She laughed softly, and placed her finger on his cheek.

"Yes, John dear . . . I want to make a little confession." She hid her flaming face against his broad shoulder. "You heard what I said—a moment ago—about my foster-father?"

"You've set me wondering, little woman."

She looked up at him, while his hand caressed her dark hair.

"I kept the secret . . . for you . . . even as I kept it for him—who is gone . . . as a very precious wedding-present. He was too late. Will you accept it, dear, my first and greatest gift to you?"

She placed a little bundle of papers in his hand. He stared, bewildered.

"What are they, sweetheart?"

The laugh she gave was lost under the arch of the pulsing sky.

"I have told you . . . my greatest gift . . . the record of my parentage. Read them, John . . . and you will understand. I'm no longer your Arab wife, but English through and through. Oh, I knew you would be surprised!"

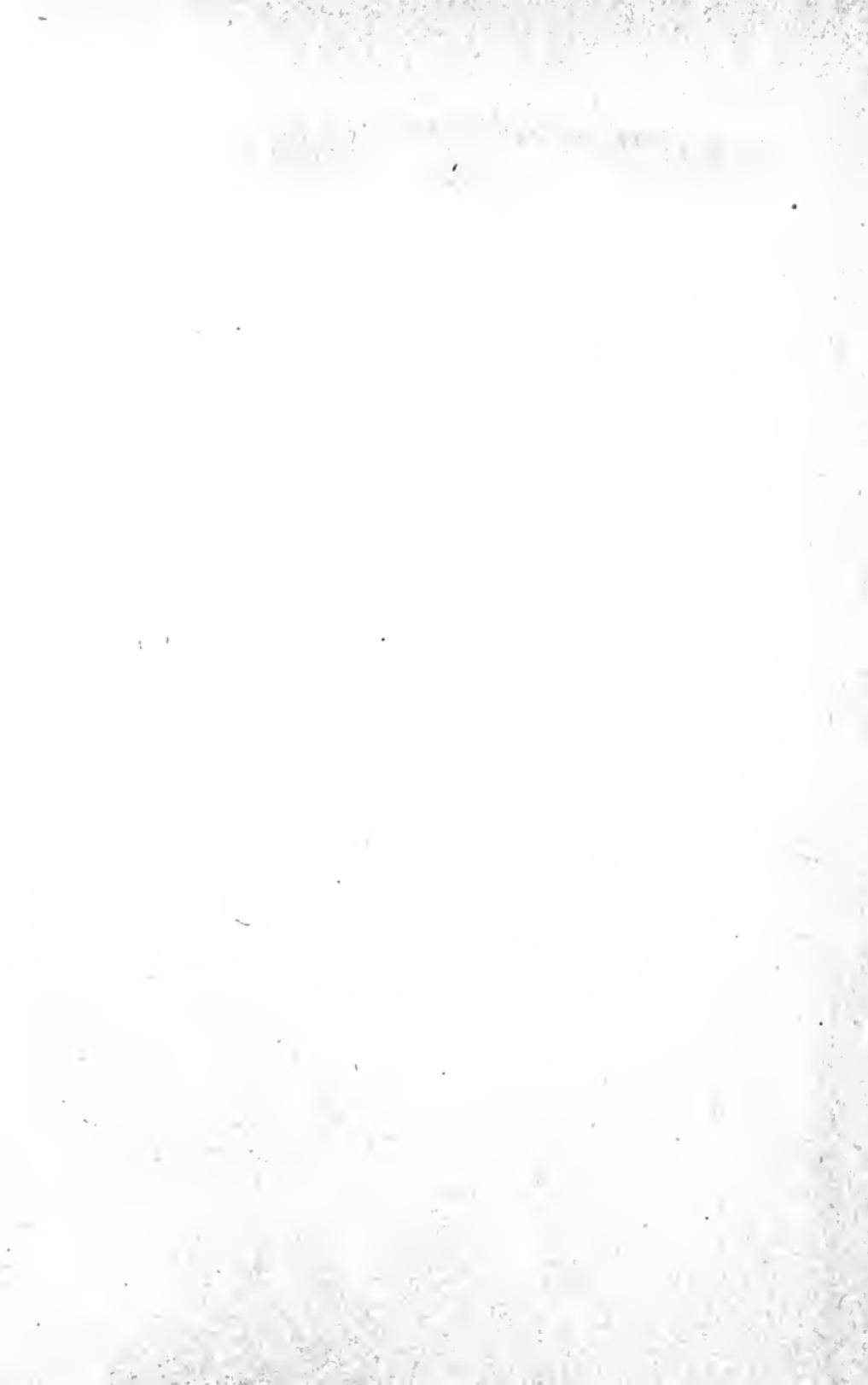
He turned the pages slowly over, and in a little while reached out and drew her gently to him again.

"A wonderful present, little Saada . . . but not the greatest gift at all. Your love, which lifted

me out of the dark places and brought me into the light, is far, far greater. See! the sun is setting. We must get back to be ready at dawn to start on our desert honeymoon."

THE END





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